

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Character Page](#)
[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1: Ruined City](#)
[Chapter 2: Policy Decision](#)
[Chapter 3: Spin Doctor](#)
[Chapter 4: Comeback](#)
[Chapter 5: Command](#)
[Chapter 6: Dream](#)
[Chapter 7: Journal](#)
[Chapter 8: Guards](#)
[Chapter 9: Devotion](#)
[Chapter 10: Scheme](#)
[Chapter 11: Folly](#)
[Chapter 12: Menace](#)
[Chapter 13: Cachinnation](#)
[Chapter 14: Surrender](#)
[Chapter 15: Aurora](#)
[Chapter 16: Encore](#)
[Chapter 17: Flux](#)
[Afterword](#)
[Congratulations](#)
[Coming Soon](#)
[Other Series](#)



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Prologue

THE Divine Nation of Lenea had wielded the reality warping abilities belonging to a tabletop RPG to steal Atou from Mynoghra. Going up against the ultimate tag team of a Player, Witch, and Saints, Takuto was forced to play his hand and use his hidden Nameless Evil God abilities to obtain a one-sided victory.

But his victory came at a cost.

Takuto had overwhelmingly neutralized his enemies and destroyed the Divine Nation of Lenea's capital, but it took a physical toll on him, resulting in him losing consciousness. His exhaustion stripped him of his memories, leaving him bedridden with no known cure.

Feeling responsible for his plight because he'd exhausted himself to rescue her from Lenea, Atou ran herself ragged trying to make it up to him, but her efforts ended in vain.

This was the tragedy that awaited Mynoghra after they had successfully demolished their enemies and brought Atou back to their side.

Was Mynoghra about to meet its end without a Commander?

Just as their empire began falling into despair, Atou made up her mind to summon a new Hero unit capable of bringing Mynoghra out of its latest predicament. Despite deciding to go through with the summoning, Atou wasn't happy about it. After all, she was about to summon *Eternal Nations'* most notorious, most glorious, troublemaker—Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio.

Chapter 1: Ruined City

<HOLY Kingdom of Qualia's Classified Records: Chronological Report on the Manifestation of the Evil God>

- Holy King Era 157, Viridescent Month
 - 13th day, 1:10 PM
 - First report of a strong evil presence from several High Clergy.
 - Same day, 1:30 PM
 - The Three Popes and Central's Cardinals are notified and an emergency meeting commences.
 - It is provisionally recognized that an abnormal situation has occurred in the Divine Nation of Lenea.
 - Same day, 2:15 PM
 - The Three Popes and the Mystic Saint issue an order to transition the Holy Kingdom into Casus Belli.
 - Urgent summons are sent to the Scribe Saint and all High Paladins.
 - Same day, 2:40 PM
 - The Scribe Saint's Miracle Arte confirms the cause of the abnormal situation in Lenea and the manifestation of the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira.
 - Same day, 2:45 PM
 - The Mystic Saint declares the start of a Holy War.
 - Same day, 3:20 PM
 - Scouting team reports a large conflagration has broken out in Lenea for unknown reasons.
 - Immediately followed by another report that the fire was promptly extinguished.
 - Immediately followed by another report correcting the prior report to state that the fire was still burning strong.
 - Discrepancies and confusion are evident in the scouts' reporting, bringing the accuracy of subsequent reports into question.

—Same day, 4:00 PM

-The Three Popes issue an order to defend the Holy Capital of Qualiane.

—Same day, 4:05 PM

-The Scribe Saint and the Mystic Saint accept the request and enter defensive positions.

—14th day, 5:30 AM

-Scouts confirm the situation at dawn.

-The fires confirmed in Lenea's direction were already extinguished.

-Reports from the Clergy accompanying the Scouts confirm traces of an Evil God.

—Same day

-The border with the Divine Nation of Lenea is blockaded.

-Henceforth, its capital is recognized as a Ruined City and designated as a Level 7 forbidden zone.



<The Divine Nation of Lenea, Divine City Amrita, Site of the burned down former St. Amritate Cathedral>

AN all-too-small girl stood amid the charred ruins. Despite being young enough she should still be under the guidance and protection of a guardian, she was saddled with a heavy responsibility that would be too great for any adult, much less a child, to shoulder.

Clad in magnificent attire to display her authority within the Holy Kingdom of Qualia, the girl was accompanied by several people who kept their distance, watching and waiting for her to speak. They all revered the girl who stood out as an anomaly in every sense of the word. They felt awe and exultation toward this noble, untouchable being. What was the meaning behind the reverent looks they directed toward such a young child?

The answer lay with the laughably large book clasped to her chest with both hands. There wasn't a soul within all of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia who didn't know her name.

Scribe Saint Lytrain Nerim Quartz, one of God's most beloved children, stared in abject horror at the devastated Divine City Amrita, a retinue of her followers close at hand.

“Urk...how awful...”

Several Paladins nodded in silent agreement with her wistful utterance.

What they laid eyes upon made the capital's former prosperity seem like a fever dream. Designated as a Ruined City by Qualia's leadership, Amrita had fallen into utter disrepair that gave that designation justice, looking more like desolated ruins lost to time than a recently attacked city.

This was no ordinary razed city. Physical devastation could eventually be repaired. Razed homes could be rebuilt. Food and supplies could be imported from Qualia. As long as there were people, it should be possible to regain some semblance of their former livelihoods, even if the path there was long and arduous.

However, the true ruin wreaked by the King of Ruin left deep, irrecoverable scars upon the very people who made the capital their home...

Several days had passed since that unfortunate day. Since the day Qualia had confirmed an anomaly within the Divine Nation of Lenea. The ensuing chaos within the Holy Kingdom of Qualia was far too pathetic to leave a record of. Distancing themselves from war for far too long played a part in their substandard reaction, but their inaction was most strongly influenced by terror—terror of the horrifying course of events that had unfolded within Lenea. This resulted in the leadership flip-flopping on their orders, massively delaying their initial response.

The Three Popes feared they would bring the King of Ruin's wrath upon themselves, so they designated all of Lenea as a Level 7 forbidden zone to save their own hide. As a result, it was nigh impossible to determine what exactly had transpired in this country or just how many lives were lost.

The only thing anyone knew for sure was the hard-to-swallow fact that the forces of good that were supposed to protect Lenea had been defeated...

And now that an official investigative team had finally been dispatched from Qualia, Lytrain was tormented by deep sorrow and a sense of powerlessness that was too much for her young mind to cope with.

“Saint Nerim, we have a rough estimate of the extent of the damage. The disease has spread to surrounding villages and towns through the people who escaped from Amrita. The disease hasn't yet spread to the border towns with Qualia thanks to the Paladins and soldiers keeping a lookout, but it's only a matter of time.”

A woman stood behind Lytrain giving this report. Naturally, she was no ordinary woman. She exuded an intimidating aura, one look from her sharp gaze enough to cause those on the other end to shrink back from her. The armor she wore was designed with mobility in mind, and although it made good use of

metal and leather throughout, it was more form-fitting than was usually allowed in Qualia's female attire. In the highly conservative Qualia, her skin-tight attire would receive criticism for inciting lust in men, but no one would dare point out such a thing to this woman.



Or rather, not a soul could even fathom to think such an audacious thing about her. After all, denunciations and judgment were her domain, her inviolable precinct...

One of the soldiers nervously spoke her name, "Inquisitor Imlerith."

"...Yes? What is it?" she responded.

Krähe Imlerith—an Inquisitor with the Holy Kingdom of Qualia's Special Holy Order Inquisition Division. She was the blade of condemnation sent to the decimated Lenea with the Scribe Saint.

"The person we sent to conduct interviews in the surrounding areas has just returned," the soldier said.

"...I see. Then please relay the contents of their report," she ordered.

The Qualia soldier who dauntlessly faced evil as the people's shield whispered his report to Krähe with a tense expression.

Scribe Saint Lytrain was the nominal person in charge of the investigative team dispatched from Central. However, since Lytrain was still so young, Krähe Imlerith gave various orders on her behalf. Krähe's role as Inquisitor made even Paladins and soldiers nervous in her presence.

A church-appointed Inquisitor. As the title suggests, she had the authority to ruthlessly investigate and intervene in the lives of Arlos's believers. There was no telling what calamity would befall someone if they got on the wrong side of an Inquisitor. The Inquisitors had arraigned countless people, yet the number they set free without punishment could be counted on two hands.

The Inquisition Division and Inquisitors had a different kind of absolute presence within Qualia from the Saint and Paladins. The Paladins and soldiers nervously interacted with Krähe, for she was rumored to be the most devoted to Arlos and her job of all the Inquisitors.

"According to the reports," the soldier began, "we have discovered traces of a large-scale conflagration centering around the old cathedral, along with an untold number of corpses belonging to Paladins and some unidentified monsters. In addition to the epidemic we've already confirmed in the surrounding areas, the residents also seem to be afflicted with some sort of memory loss. We are lacking too much information at this juncture to determine what happened here."

There wasn't even a shadow left of Lenea's former glory and prosperity. Once the King of Ruin had his way with it, this land became the epicenter of a spreading plague and where people forgot themselves and went mad.

Krähe grimaced over how fitting the name Ruined City was for this place. The soldier continued to speak of some of the most unforgivable atrocities to the forces of good going on there. Almost no one knew what had truly transpired in the Divine Nation of Lenea during this sudden freak attack. Every holy soldier in

the region had returned to God's bosom, and what few witnesses there were, all had added memories.

Perhaps further investigation would reveal some clues about the horrific events that befell this city. Regardless, one look at the poor souls left alive revealed that something beyond mortal comprehension had transpired.

"Furthermore," the soldier continued, "Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne have both departed from this country."

In the midst of the report came information about the Saints' survival. A glimmer of hope returned to the investigative team, who'd been in low spirits since seeing the battered citizens and deformed corpses of Lenea's Paladins. But this good news was accompanied by equally bad news.

"The two Saints survived?" Krähe asked in an emotionless voice, her nebulous gaze sharply fixing upon the soldiers, her eyes reminding them eerily of a doll's.

"Y-Yes, ma'am... According to the reports," the soldier stuttered.

"This is bad news indeed," she said.

On the receiving end of her soul-penetrating gaze, the soldiers gasped and shuddered.

Krähe's deployment with the Lenea Investigation Squad could only mean one terrifying thing. Inquisitors were occasionally granted the authority to condemn even the Saints. Sending Krähe and the Scribe Saint to this condemned land spoke volumes about what Central expected to find and have done about it.

"It's unacceptable for a Saint to flee without finishing what she has started... Doubly so when there are two," Krähe said clerically. "This brings their faith and devotion into question. This is bad."

Someone gasped. What did Krähe mean? No, her intentions needed no explanation.

Krähe was considering labeling the two Saints as heretics. They had gone off and established a country of their own accord, incited Qualia's own people to join them, then left them to their ruin, like leading cattle to the slaughter. And then the very King of Ruin they proclaimed they had subjugated had come back to return the favor.

Just how many people had died due to them? How many people still suffered at this moment due to their actions? There was no justifiable reason in all the world for them to flee alone without finishing what they had started.

Even outside of her role as a holy Inquisitor, as a member of the Human race, Krähe was deeply angered by what the two Saints had done.

The calamity brought about by the King of Ruin had to be eradicated. As long as that evil god still lived, he loomed as an ever-present threat to Qualia's

Southern Province, which was geographically closest to Mynoghra. Qualia needed to prepare to deal with the Dark Continent to the south, and they were already lacking the military strength necessary to stabilize the unending turmoil within the Lawful Continent.

As long as the Mystic Saint remained cloistered deep within Central's holy capital, offering prayers to Arlos, the Scribe Saint would inevitably be sent out to fight the forces of evil at every corner. With Qualia no longer able to ignore the state of things in the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals, all the responsibility would fall upon the small shoulders of the little girl standing idly in front of Krähe.

Krähe's frustration with the situation began giving her a dull, throbbing headache. But she had to get the ball rolling. Because that was all she could do—it was all she was allowed to do...

"Nerim," Krähe called out to the young girl before her. She knelt down so she could look at her at eye level, and though her expression was still devoid of emotion, she didn't exude the same intimidating aura as before.

"Ah! Yes? What is it, Inquisitor Imlerith?"

Krähe's expression slightly clouded at her response. For the first time, Krähe allowed what she felt to show through her perfect mask of doll-like indifference. Curiously enough, the emotion that showed was deep sorrow.

"I believe we should begin with saving the people of this land. The scars left by the King of Ruin are too gruesome to leave be. Although they once broke rank with us, the people residing here used to be Qualia's citizens. God would never stand for abandoning them," Krähe spoke her opinion as if trying to confirm something with her, sadness still etched into her features. Her eyes intently studied Saint Lytrain, almost as if she were observing the girl. "We will temporarily suspend our search for Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne. I don't know what led them to abandon this land, but we don't have enough people to spare in a search for them."

"Um..." Lytrain darted her gaze around her surroundings and hastily flipped through her journal. Then she began scanning its contents as if searching for something.

Krähe wordlessly closed her eyes to that sad sight. Then, after a moment of fighting off some unspoken feelings, she silently opened her eyes.

"I see... You're doing it again, Nerim. That's a bad thing." Krähe gently reached out to stop her from flipping through the pages. "Your power is certainly capable of saving the people here. Your power, which is said to be closest to God, should be able to..."

Surprised to be stopped from reading the journal, Lytrain's big, innocent

eyes seized on Krähe. Under the questioning gaze of those pure, sinless eyes, Krähe spoke to the tiny Saint with heartrending sadness.

“But please don’t ever forget the insurmountable cost of using it. This humble servant doesn’t ever want you to use that journal’s power.”

“Sorry...?” Lytrain blinked at her.

“I’m just speaking to myself. On another note, please call me Krähe. I’m not fond of stiff formalities.” Krähe rose with a stiff smile straining the corners of her lips.

Warmed by her attitude, Lytrain gave voice to the unease brewing within her. “Um, did they find my Father...?” She choked up there and said nothing more.

Lytrain’s father, her adoptive father, High Paladin Verdel, was currently classified as missing. Lytrain had covertly reunited with him once more in this city, but their ties were severed during the ensuing chaos.

Under such circumstances as these, it was normal to worry about her father’s well-being during the horrors of war. But her request would never be granted. Since the day Lytrain became a Saint, her relationship with her adoptive father was severed. She was the protector of the masses, not of one special person. Such was the true nature of a Saint that was never allowed to change.

“Urk... I’m very sorry, Inquisitor Imlerith,” she squeaked out.

“It’s Krähe.”

“Erm, Miss...Krähe.”

Nebulous eyes closely scrutinized Lytrain. Unable to endure that unrelenting gaze, Lytrain squeezed her eyes shut, steeling herself for words of warning or a harsh scolding. Instead, Krähe’s hand kindly rested upon her head. The gesture was awkward and stiff, but it was filled with warmth nevertheless.

“...It’s okay. We will surely find your father. You have offered up a great price to God until now to make it so.” The sadness cracking through Krähe’s schooled features belied the kindness in her voice. “...That’s why I can say it will surely be all right.”

Krähe’s words were intended to persuade the little Saint of this...and most of all, she was trying to convince herself it was true.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The Divine Nation of Lenea has been destroyed.

- Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials
 - The Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair
- Have gone missing.

OK

Chapter 2: Policy Decision

DEEP within the Accursed Lands, in Mynoghra's Palace, the damage sustained in the previous battle was examined and future policies were being formulated. Sludge Atou took the lead for this empire-management council meeting. A somber air permeated the room in Takuto's absence.

"To begin," Atou said, "I believe you are all fully aware of the current situation in Mynoghra."

Everyone nodded their unspoken understanding.

The last conflict Mynoghra found itself embroiled in involved the Divine Nation of Lenea, which had seceded from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. Chaos and a series of shocking events punctuated every aspect of Mynoghra's conflict with the forces that hailed from a tabletop RPG. It all began with a surprise attack and the instant loss of Atou. This was followed up by Takuto's solo counterattack and retrieval of Atou.

Takuto had brought literal ruin and devastation upon his enemies, fitting his title as the King of Ruin, and no one could predict his actions up to that final battle. That battle made *Takuto Ira*'s existence known to the world.

However, one look at the results...made anyone wonder if it could truly be considered a victory. On paper, everything looked good, with the successful return of Atou to Mynoghra and wiping the Divine Nation of Lenea right off the maps. But the cost was far too great for Mynoghra.

"Let me be straight with you," Atou continued, her voice grave, "King Takuto is currently suffering from memory loss and is in no position to lead the empire."

Their victory in the last battle cost them their king.

Takuto Ira's condition was like a neon sign illuminating the precarious situation Mynoghra was in. A kingdom is its king, just as a king is his kingdom. With Takuto taken out of the picture, Mynoghra had plummeted into more dire straits than ever before.

"Has there been any change in the king's condition...?"

"Unfortunately not."

Warrior Captain Gia was grasping at straws when he asked Atou this with a forlorn expression, and his shoulders sagged when he heard her disheartening reply.

The easiest way to explain Takuto's current condition would be to classify it as a form of amnesia. He retained his ability to communicate and general knowledge, but he'd completely forgotten who he was, as if he lost his sense of self—his identity. He spent his days absently staring out the window from a chair in his private chambers. For some inexplicable reason, he occasionally regained his memories and would converse with Atou if the timing was right, but these moments of lucidity were too brief to govern Mynoghra.

The cause of his amnesia was unknown, and the cure was equally a mystery. The only thing they knew for certain was that they had to act fast to find a stopgap measure to keep the empire running.

"I'm responsible for the king's malady, but I'm sure you all understand we haven't the time to debate such things." Although Atou felt like her sense of worthlessness and powerlessness over the matter would eat her alive, she pushed through it to keep the meeting on track.

This isn't over yet, she thought. King Takuto saved me when I fell into enemy hands. It's my turn to save him. There's plenty for me to do in his absence.

"It's our duty to manage Mynoghra in the king's absence. We must do everything in our power to help him recover as swiftly as possible," Elder Moltar said.

"Exactly," Atou nodded. "I've been granted the authority to run the empire as his proxy for now. It's not a job I excel at, but I'm confident we won't have any issues in that regard as long as you all continue to cooperate and support me."

Although Atou had fallen apart in despair over Takuto's plight for a time, she was now relatively calm and composed. As a unit possessing the necessary functions to serve as a Hero and a Commander, Atou was qualified to manage Mynoghra. With the Dark Elves' full support, she didn't have much to worry about on the Domestic Affairs side either.

"Our domestic situation poses no real threat," Elder Moltar agreed. "Things are different once you look outside our borders, however."

"Indeed. We need to come up with an urgent response to external affairs," Atou said. "But any decision we make is a risk without adequate information."

The real threat to Mynoghra came from the outside.

Elder Moltar's sharp discernment continued to be a boon for the management council. As he said, the actions of outside forces were of the greatest concern.

Mynoghra had removed the Divine Nation of Lenea from the playing field during their last battle. They had also completely eliminated Slurping Witch

Erakino and Player Keiji Kuhara, who were behind that empire. Unfortunately, everything after that point was shrouded in mystery. Even if the TRPG forces still had stragglers left out there, it was unlikely they would take action against Mynoghra right away. The real issue was the danger of not knowing what move the forces of good would take next.

On the bright side, Mynoghra had a huge advantage in this world that they didn't in *Eternal Nations*—the Dark Elves.

"Intelligence gathering is one burden you can set your mind at ease on," Elder Moltar assured. "While the king rests, his humble servants work. I've already dispatched capable agents to get the job done."

Long before the Dark Elves joined Mynoghra, they worked as assassins and spies. They could fully unleash the talents Takuto approved of even when he was out of commission.

"Excellent," Atou said approvingly. "So? I take it you've uncovered something?"

Emle had been waiting for that prompt to launch into a full explanation of the reports she'd memorized. The information was unfavorable for Mynoghra. In summary, they confirmed that the two Saints had survived and that their whereabouts were unknown. In the end, the two women survived just as Witch Erakino had hoped. Having witnessed their bizarre friendship up close and personal, Atou highly doubted those Saints would stay out of Mynoghra's way in the future.

A new concern had been put into play, further adding to Atou's stress.

"It's concerning that they're missing in action," Elder Moltar groaned. "We best view it as them laying low until they can build up their strength to strike back at us. We should have dealt the death blow to them in His Majesty's stead..."

"I agree..." Atou shook her head. "No, I can't imagine King Takuto overlooking something like that, so he must have had plans for those two Saints as well. The fact that he didn't enact those plans shows how close to his limit he was at the end there..."

"And with His Majesty's welfare as our top priority, there was nothing more we could do about them," Elder Moltar nodded with understanding.

Atou thought back to that day. Takuto was about to finish off Saint Soalina at the very end there. But he stopped at the last second and suddenly chose to retreat. He showed constant signs of fighting off a headache throughout the battle, so it was likely that whatever ailment he was holding off had decided to blow up on him in that final moment.

And that wasn't all there was to it, either.

Atou clearly heard Takuto click his tongue and mutter, “...*Did I go too far?*”

In other words, some sort of anomaly occurred that the rest of them couldn't perceive, forcing him to change tactics. And their current predicament was the result. It was something even Takuto himself couldn't predict; consequently, it ate away at his very person.

“Miss Atou, what is His Majesty's current status? What I mean is, well, will he recover if he continues to rest...?” Emle asked, choked up by sadness.

“No. I can't say with absolute certainty, but it's dangerously optimistic to assume time will resolve the issue,” Atou said, confronting Emle with the cruel reality of the situation as a lump formed in her throat.

Atou hadn't just been silently standing by watching this situation unfold. The first thing she did was call upon Maria, whose abilities dealt with addling the mind and causing forgetfulness, and had her examine Takuto in secret from the others. She received a curious diagnosis in response. In short: “Rather than forgetting his memories, it's like His Majesty never existed here in first place...”

Something strange was going on. The more Atou investigated Takuto's ailment, the more hopeless the situation seemed. Thus, she concluded that there was a painfully slim chance of Takuto recovering with time. That was all the more apparent from how Takuto had acted at the end there.

They needed something to help them out of this plight. And, for better or worse, Atou knew of exactly one solution.

“King Takuto's condition is likely a direct result of using his abilities,” Atou said. “However, as it stands now, I have no idea what is making it worse or how to cure him.”

Darkness seemed to fall over the meeting room. The despair in the council members' hearts made them feel like someone had blown out the flame of hope. But Atou's next words reignited the extinguished candle.

“Thus, I will seek another Hero's assistance in resolving King Takuto's predicament.”

All eyes homed in on Atou. Surprise and hope glimmered within their gazes. As the only other person who knew about this decision in advance, Elder Moltar watched the proceedings calmly. But the clear anticipation on the other's faces indicated their level of excitement. Which just went to show the massive influence Heroes held in Mynoghra.

“The Hero's name is Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio,” Atou explained. “He has no ability to fight, but he excels at using his cunning to overcome any disadvantages. It's hard to explain his abilities, but...let's just say that his true value really shines during complex situations where brute force isn't an option.”

“Marvelous!” Gia exclaimed. “He sounds perfect for our exact situation! Let us summon this great Hero at once and have him cure the king!”

“Hear, hear! I feared for our future when I heard His Majesty was unwell, but I can finally see the light!” Emle chimed in.

“Indeed. This sounds like the best method to break through our current predicament. From what I’ve heard, His Majesty holds this Hero’s resourcefulness in high esteem. I look forward to meeting him,” Elder Moltar said.

Delighted expressions showed on the faces of the Elfuur Sisters and the several civil officials present for the meeting to take notes. The heavy melancholy hanging over the meeting room was replaced by enthusiasm and optimism.

“We have ample Resources to summon a Hero,” Atou said with tepid calm. “There isn’t anything to prep in advance, so I’d like to do the summoning tomorrow. I know that cunning man will come up with a plan to bring King Takuto onto the road of recovery.”

Determination blazed in the eyes of the Dark Elves who hung on to her every word. They were determined to protect their king and make Mynoghra the sole hegemonic force in the world.

The first step toward that was summoning a new Hero. It could be said that summoning this Hero was like firing off the first warning shot to all who dared oppose Mynoghra’s peace.

But someone had to go and pour cold water on their enthusiasm...

“But...well...I have a favor to ask of you all,” Atou said, fidgeting and pulling a wry face.

The Dark Elves were confused by her attitude, which belied the excitement they expected to see from her. Whether she picked up on their confusion or not, Atou steeled herself and gave voice to a request that was hard to make sense of.

“For just a moment, I want you to imagine someone whose mind is the most twisted in the world, does and says things more annoying than anyone else in the world, and gets under your skin more than anyone else in the whole wide world.”

The Dark Elves were left perplexed once more. What was the point of imagining such a person? They didn’t have a good reason to deny her request, so they all imagined this person they obviously would rather not ever meet.

“That is Vittorio in a nutshell.”

And then Atou lobbed a bomb into the room.

“I’ll be straight with you: I will be livid at first. Just like how the sun will always set and water will always run downhill...Vittorio will put all his energy

into picking a fight with me and I'll respond in kind. That is who we are and the only way for us."

Often, talented people have sensibilities that are far different from that of ordinary people. According to Atou, Vittorio was just that sort of person. Every time he opened his mouth, he would incite rage in others and leave them uncomfortable. It was impossible to tell what was going on in that twisted mind of his, but he always got results. Yet for all his achievements, his conduct and speech were the epitome of inappropriate and imprudent.

A Hero who pisses people off just by existing—that was Vittorio.

"What I would like to request of you all," Atou continued, "is for you to stop me when I snap and try to kill Vittorio. I am seriously not compatible with that conniving rat."

Vittorio was ranked first among the Heroes you don't want to have as subordinates and first as the Hero you wouldn't want as your superior in *Eternal Nations*. And unfortunately for Atou, Vittorio was designed as a Hero who absolutely loved to tease and torment Sludge Atou.

Atou's heart sank as she thought back to the Hero who made her blow a gasket and lose her head over and over and over again in every single side story added to the game to flesh it out.

"Honestly...just thinking about him...makes my gut churn..." Atou chewed out as she visibly trembled. Her physical reaction displayed just what she thought of Vittorio.

The young lady named Atou had a childish side to her that often belied her role as a Hero who served the evil King of Ruin. It wasn't all that unusual for her to wear her emotions on her sleeve, but her visceral reaction toward Vittorio took things a step further. This just went to show how the being known as Sludge Atou hated Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio to her very core.

"If it was up to me, I'd rather die before we summon that swindler," Atou hissed. "Unfortunately, to my great displeasure, his brains and ability are second to none. I can say with absolute confidence that no one other than King Takuto can best the schemester in a battle of wits... That is the kind of creature he is."

The Dark Elves could only nod along with Atou's impassioned speech.

"ARGH!" She shouted. "Just thinking about him makes my blood boil..."

She hated Vittorio so much that the thought of him made her sick with anger.

Everyone tried to keep their faces straight before Atou's unhappy outburst. What really sunk in for them was how much she acknowledged Vittorio's ability despite her utter distaste for the Hero.

All the Heroes were the paramount of supreme power, but just what was

this newest addition to the Hero ranks like?

The summoning of a new Hero was waiting just around the corner as everyone fidgeted with excitement and anxiety.

A new period of change was about to arrive for Mynoghra.



THE night before the summoning was surprisingly calm compared to the stormy days leading up to it. It was a quiet, relaxed time with no one to interfere with the two of them.

Atou was standing next to Takuto, who was sitting in his chair absentmindedly staring out the window at the nightscape. Her gaze was gentle as she watched over the master she respected and adored from the bottom of her heart.

“Now that I think about it,” Atou said softly, “this might be the first occasion we have ever shared in such peaceful silence together...”

No one answered her.

Takuto seemed like his mind was elsewhere, and in truth, it likely was. But Atou pressed on talking regardless.

“King Takuto, deep down I know it isn’t right to admit this, but I almost find our current situation...nostalgic. Back in the day, we used to talk just the two of us until late into the night. Well, not that I could respond to you back then, but I did get to hear all your stories.”

Atou thought back to the distant past. Before Takuto and Atou came to this world, they met every night in Takuto’s hospital bed. Sure, it was just Takuto one-sidedly talking to her through his computer screen—an action most would view as less than sane. Even so, they had formed a real bond during those days. And that bond continued to bind them together to this day.

That was exactly why...

“That’s why it’s my turn to tell you all the stories, King Takuto. Until the day you get better, and we can return to our regular time together...”

No answer. But Atou wholeheartedly believed her feelings were reaching him. Just like how his words had reached her. Her words would reach him too.

Thus, she spoke endlessly to Takuto until the stillness of night lulled him to sleep, all the while immersing in their nostalgic memories.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Sludge Atou has temporarily become Mynoghra's Commander.

During this period, Takuto Ira is removed as Commander.

A new Unit to produce has been selected!

Spawning: Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio

OK

Chapter 3: Spin Doctor

THE calm before the storm—there's no saying more apt to describe the eerie stillness enveloping this particular day.

"I will commence the summoning ritual..." Atou announced. "It should turn out fine since it did with Isla, but please be on guard just in case."

The Dark Elf Riflemen guarding the area nodded.

Atou was attempting to summon another Hero in the same Ceremonial Grounds where they had summoned Isla, Queen of Bugs. This time they would be using piles of gold in the ritual. They'd obtained the gold when they defeated *Brave Questers'* Demon Lord Army, and the Ceremonial Grounds were practically buried underneath the coin mountains.

The cost of a Hero increases with each summon.

More than half of those mountains of gold would be consumed in this summoning. They would still have plenty left over, but they couldn't keep using their money like it grew on trees anymore.

Atou deliberately didn't invite Gia, Elder Moltar, Emle, or the Elfuur Sisters to this ritual. Vittorio was a professional cozenner. Atou wanted to prevent him from misleading them before she could explain things.

Vittorio's skillset was unique. Even Atou couldn't predict what would happen, so she performed the summoning ritual with the utmost caution and apprehension.

A few moments after she closed her eyes...a change occurred to the mountain of gold. The gold coins began to float as if gravity had vanished around them. Then, as if blown away by a gust of wind, they flew in an arc that formed a small tornado and converged in the center of the Ceremonial Grounds.

The golden whirlwind gradually increased its density and speed and eventually transformed into a single mass. Then the spherical mass slowly took on the shape of a human, and suddenly exploded with a sound like shattering glass.

"Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittooooorio is here! I gleefully present myself upon receiving your copacetic summoooooooooonz!"

IT appeared. Standing well over six-foot-five. Despite being taller than most, his gaunt physique and unhealthy complexion made him come across as someone who made their living conning people on the side of the street for food.

His limbs were abnormally long, and his eyes gleamed with a bone-chilling blackness. He wore clothes reminiscent of gloomy darkness as if to represent his affiliation with Mynoghra, but the design was beyond mortal understanding. On top of his head sat the oddest-looking hat.

More than anything else, the sly expression on his face, as if he couldn't hide his inclination to lie, spoke volumes about what kind of Hero he was.

Atou studied him amid the Riflemen's audible gasps, observing his every move.

Before long, the new Hero—Vittorio—performed an overly exaggerated bow and scrape, then raised his gaze to appraise the group that summoned him.

“Oh dear?”

A contrived display of surprise.

“Oh dear, dearie, dear, deaaaar?”

A contrived display of confusion.

Every little action of his irritated Atou and made her wary. This was Vittorio, all right. The creature she had summoned was the Hero Atou despised down to a T. Which was exactly what made him more dangerous and unpredictable than anything else.

“Where art moi's preeminent King Takuto Ira, the great darkness of the abyssssss?” Vittorio asked.

Atou was relieved those were his first words. She had already witnessed Isla's loyalty after summoning, but that didn't ease her fears that Vittorio might not acknowledge Takuto as his master.

No, it was far too early to relax. An endless abyss was more forthcoming with its thoughts than the screwball grinning away like he just won the lottery as he gave his surroundings a once over. Knowing him, he was likely coming up with a thousand schemes behind that frivolous and goading smile of his.

But the die had already been cast. Atou had summoned him to borrow his power, so borrow his power she would. Her first course of action was to explain the situation to him and request his cooperation.

Tension running through her, Atou steeled herself for the chaos that was sure to ensue and finally engaged the master swindler.

“Thank you for coming, Vittorio,” she said. “Allow me to explain the situation with King Takuto.”

“Well, well, well! What do we have here? Why, if it isn't it sludgy Atou?! You have my utmost condolences—pft—for your eternally one-dimensional appearance! Buahaha!”

Vittorio's first words were an insult.

Atou ignored him, a blue vein bulging along her temple. If she let him

provoke her with such a childish comment, she wouldn't be able to face Takuto when he woke up.



The most important thing in this moment was Takuto's well-being and recovery. In other words, Atou's pride and fury had no place here. Her primary goal was to move things along, which would in turn aid Takuto.

I'll suck it up for right now, she thought, but I have every intention of making him pay for calling my chest one-dimensional later...

"You can make all the off-handed comments you want later," Atou said, her expression taut. "You *will* listen to my explanation on King Takuto and this world first."

"Mmm, listen to youuuu...?" Vittorio rubbed his chin and wrinkled his brow, showing his utmost distaste at the idea before prompting, "Go on theeeen?"

Atou expected that level of disrespect; it didn't ruffle her. She actually felt a tad surprised he didn't say more to provoke her. From all appearances, Vittorio seemed like he wanted to gather information as soon as possible too. She was stunned to learn he had enough sense to worry after his master's well-being, but at least now she could safely assume they had made it past the first crucial step of this exchange.

"I'll do just that. It's a long story, but hear me out until the end. I'm going to start from the time we arrived in this world—"

The Dark Elf Riflemen guarded the grounds, so Atou couldn't delve into matters concerning their past lives or *Eternal Nations*. She picked her words carefully as she related everything that had happened to her and Takuto since arriving in this world, finishing with the great battle that resulted in their current predicament.



"BAH! This all happened because of your utter incompetence! Do your damn job, sludge tits!"

"GRRRR!"

Atou was experiencing the very definition of having to bite her tongue. She had no rebuttal for Vittorio's lambasting. Or rather, she had to refrain from talking back. How could she argue when Vittorio was absolutely right and her powerlessness created this situation?

Could she really call herself the king's right hand when she couldn't protect him? Feelings of remorse consumed Atou.

Not only did I not protect him, but I landed him in this position because he had to protect me! she lamented. Atou was powerless to call herself Takuto's

Hero right now.

“Aaaaaaah! Poor King Takuto! My condolences to the king for being stuck protecting and babying the incompetent! Alack, I can’t belieeeeeeeve he’s bedridden after having to wipe your arses for you! Woe is he! Yet, glorious King of Darkness, Takuto Ira! You, my greatness, are at fault for committing one damning blunder! What, you ask? Why, you mistook the first Hero to summon, my lieeeeeeeeege! And whooooo was it that you truly needed as your one and only Hero? Yes! It’s moi, Vittorio!”

Atou’s irritation ballooned all throughout Vittorio’s long-winded speech. But she had enough restraint not to play into his hand by exploding with reckless anger. She took deep breaths, maintaining her composure to drive home she wasn’t to be played today.

“I’ll accept your criticism for now,” she allowed. “Returning King Takuto to full health comes before all else. Vittorio...we don’t know how to get King Takuto’s strength back. Please lend us your wisdom and ability.”

“Hm? Hm-hm-hmmmm? That’s an aaaaaawfully commendable approach for you, sludgy Atou! And it bores me to tears!”

Was everything he said up until this point solely to tease and provoke me? Atou wondered.

Discovering she wouldn’t take the bait, Vittorio grew disinterested and crouched to apathetically draw in the dirt with his long, bony finger. Then, out of the blue, he cried out.

“Oh! I just thought up a brilliant plan! Holy crap— Er, ahem,” Vittorio cleared his throat, trying to cover up the fact he switched his speech mannerism from sounding more old-timey to slang. “It’s true our king’s plight is a national crisis we cannot overlook. Vittorio here will put his whole heart and soul into resolving this problem for King Takuto. Let us do everything it takes to restore the king’s mind! You can leave it aaaaaaaaall to me, sludgy Atou! To me, Vittoriooooo! Set your mind at ease and put moi in charge...of everyyyyyyything! Seriously, all of it.”

“...I leave it all in your hands.”

Atou had no other answer to give.

She had at least put in the request for Vittorio to look into a way to cure Takuto as she had hoped, but as every word of his oozed with the pungent smell of a swindler working his magic, Atou felt nothing but dread for the future.



AFTER Vittorio joined Mynoghra and had his long-sought-after audience with an amnesic Takuto, he swiftly met with the empire-management council members. With that all finished, Mynoghra had high hopes he'd get straight to work, only to experience an onslaught of nauseating and mentally straining nightmarish days.

“WHAAAAAT! ISSSSS! THIIIISSSS?!”

Upon one such miserable day, Emle, who had risen up the ranks and attained an important position within Mynoghra, was so busy with paperwork that she no longer even knew what her job was. Vittorio had seemingly appeared out of thin air and was looming right above her, ogling the documents she was compiling.

“Eeek!” she let out a cry, startled by his sudden appearance. She hadn't sensed him at all. Quickly trying to compose herself, she answered his query politely, “U-Um... I'm summarizing what happened earlier.”

In all honesty, she couldn't stand this whacky Hero who always had a leering grin on his face. However, she couldn't just ignore him when he was tasked with the crucial mission of finding a cure for Takuto.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh?! A so-called report, is it, hmm? Then excuse me as I take a looky...” Meanwhile, Vittorio seemed oblivious to Emle's feelings as he roughly snatched the papers from her and read them from beginning to end, making obnoxious comments along the way. “Mm-hm, mm-hm. Huh. What?! Oh. Ah, I see, I see. Haaaaaaaaaaaaa.”

He ended in a very loud sigh.

Emle had heard plenty of stories from Vittorio's victims about just how troublesome and obnoxious he could be. She'd also received advice from Atou, so she planned on just playing along with him until he left her alone. Unfortunately, she let her annoyance over him taking such an attitude with the reports and records she worked on at the cost of her precious sleep dash those plans.

“Is there a problem?” she asked, irked.

“Nah? No problems here? Nothing much really? It's just...weeeeeeeell... you know?”

“What is it?!”

Emle had reached her limit. She knew he was provoking her, and she took the bait. No one could blame her for it either. Neither Mynoghra nor the Dark Elf clans had such a morally bankrupt sociopath like him before. When Emle thought back on her life, only the Elf Chiefs ever lobbed similar inciting words at her, and compared to the huckster in front of her, their remarks felt more like child's play.

Everyone living in Mynoghra, not just Emle, had never encountered such an extreme and troublesome person before. In a sense, the residents of Mynoghra were in the midst of a trial that tested their patience.

And Emle's trial had just commenced against her will.

"It's just...you lack awareness," Vittorio said, his grin deepening.

"Excuse me? A-Awareness?" Emle parroted.

"Hooooow to put it? You aren't zealous enough, maybe? Don't you hold an important position in Mynoghra, *mon saucisson*? You aren't embarrassed to receive a salary for such slipshod work, mm?"

Emle was assaulted by a storm of insults, scathing criticism, and scornful laughter like a piece of clothing hung out to dry in a hurricane. Most of what Vittorio said went right over her head, but she could tell he was mocking her. You didn't need to understand what the man was saying when his purposeful looks and unrelenting sneer said it at all. She couldn't sense anything from him but his desire to deride her.

"Th-Then tell me specifically what I must do! I would really appreciate your guidance!" Emle shouted angrily. It was rare for the usually calm and rational Dark Elf to let her emotions get the better of her.

And this reaction was exactly what Vittorio was fishing for.

"Think for yourself. You're a working adult, aren't'cha?"

"HUUUUUUUUH?! Youuuuuuuuuuu!!!"

Vittorio's remark turned Emle's face red with anger.

"Eeeeeeeep! Oh noooooo, the angry beast is after me. And so, it's time for me to bid you ado! Fare thee well! Ciao!"

Either satisfied with her outburst or just plain bored of messing with her, Vittorio departed as theatrically and mysteriously as he'd appeared. Glaring daggers at his departing form, Emle gnashed her teeth in frustration.



ON another day, Vittorio targeted the Dark Elf Warriors. They were the forces led by Gia, who strove daily to further their training for the sake of king and country.

"Oh, what's this I see? Why, it's the Dark Elves armed with the firearms bestowed upon them by King Takutoooo! Now 'tis a sight for sore eyes!"

Once again that man appeared like black smoke. He crept up on them without their realizing it because they were in the middle of training—yet they should've noticed him because their senses were honed!

Warrior Captain Gia received him as his thoughts whirled with questions about the methods Vittorio used to sneak up on them. “Yes, with the weapons from the Land of the Gods given to us by the king, we have become a more powerful force than ever before. We are working daily to improve our skills and become a better sword and shield for our king.”

“If that’s truuuuue, then King Takuto must be perfectly safe thanks to you, nooooooooo?!”

“Oof!” Gia groaned. “...That’s...!” He lost all the enthusiasm and confidence he began the conversation with.

Vittorio already had a solid grasp on everything that had happened in Mynoghra before his arrival. He was deliberately drawing attention to the Warriors’ sore spot to get under their skin. Atou had thoroughly warned Gia about Vittorio, and Gia steeled himself for the fleecing to come.

“It huuurts. I huuurt...”

Yet rather than taunting them, Vittorio suddenly clutched his chest and fell to his knees as he began crying out in pain.

“Wha—?! Wh-What’s wrong, Lord Vittorio?!”

Gia couldn’t ignore his pain. Atou had instructed him to ignore Vittorio in every way possible, but if he didn’t at least feign some concern, it could affect his standing as Warrior Captain. Besides, if Vittorio were genuinely ill or hurt, it would harm Mynoghra as a whole. With those thoughts in mind, Gia addressed Vittorio with worry, but...

“The injuries I sustained from you not protecting me huuurt, Captain Gia.”

“Huh? What injuries are you talking—”

“I am merely speaking on behalf of the king.”

Vittorio’s insidiousness bundled up Gia’s concern for him and dropkicked it out of the picture.

“It huuurts. I huuurt... I’m gonna diiiiie like this. All because a certain somebody failed to protect me, I’m gonna go bye-bye and die-die.”

“Wh-What the hell are you on about, man?! I won’t allow you to disrespect the king!”

Vittorio snapped straight back up on his feet, his expression dead serious as he stated, “I’m disrespecting *you*, not the king.”

Gia’s anger ballooned in response to Vittorio’s methodical provoking. *Why does he play games like this? What did this man even come to Mynoghra for?* Gia wondered. *What in the Accursed Lands is he thinking and what is he trying to do by not fulfilling his own responsibilities and causing discord in the empire? I’ve heard that he has an incendiary temperament and likes to provoke*

and infuriate others, but this is too much. No matter how crucial this Hero is in restoring the king's health, if things continue as they are, it could even lead to the nation's collapse. And honestly, I highly doubt this man is capable of saving the king.

Gia was beginning to think that, depending on the situation, he might need to brace himself to deal with Vittorio in an entirely different way than he had first planned.

"I don't deny that our inadequacy gave way to the king's current crisis," Gia conceded. "That's a dishonor we must live with for the rest of our days. But is that really something for *you* to comment on, Lord Vittorio? Isn't the fact His Majesty never called for you proof that he has no faith in *your* ability?"

Gia seethed with anger. He possessed neither the self-restraint nor the soft-hearted temperament to silently stew in his anger like Emle. On the contrary, being criticized by someone who hadn't gotten any results yet themselves only incited him to snap back.

The Dark Elf Warriors listening to the exchange felt the same as their Captain, and the atmosphere in the Training Grounds instantly grew unwelcoming toward Vittorio. Now, as for how Vittorio responded to being bathed in their contempt...

"Eeeep! Oh, how very scary! I'm gonna get killed by the Dark Elves who won't be capable of much at this rate but have the gall to get angry at somebody else! Time for moi's special move: fleeing the scene!"

"C-Come back here, Lord Vittorio! Damn!" Gia swore. "How's he so fast?!"

Vittorio loved to stir people up and then beat it out of there. Was there meaning to these actions? Or was it simply his sick hobby...?

The mental damage caused by Vittorio rapidly spread through the empire, as if he'd completely tabled his mission to find a cure for Takuto to play mind games instead.



TAKUTO was suffering from amnesia, so it was impossible for him to take over the baton of leadership as king. This resulted in *all* complaints and protests being lodged with Atou.

Sludge Atou was slumped over her desk with her head cradled in her hands, not caring one bit about keeping up prideful appearances as a Hero.

"S-So much worse than I thought. He's so much more troublesome than

even I could have imagined...” she groaned.

“Our candies got taken away!” Maria huffed.

“He made off with all the sweets His Majesty gave us...” Caria puffed.

Atou’s cheeks twitched as she forced a smile in response to the Elfuur Sisters’ cute rant. The sisters’ cheeks were completely puffed out as they fumed over their stash being snatched. They were Vittorio’s victims No. 1 and No. 2 today.

To the uninitiated, his harassment toward the twins might seem friendly compared to what he did to the others. However, Vittorio chose the best way to get under their skin after understanding that the sisters were still mentally young and acted on emotion rather than logic and reason. He went to the most nuclear option by stealing the sweets the twins had received directly from Takuto and had kept stashed away as their secret treasure.

The only silver lining was that he did this during the height of the afternoon—if he pulled the same stunt on the night of the full moon, Mynoghra would become bathed in blood. In Vittorio’s blood, of course. Although it was obvious that he’d timed his crimes perfectly during the day away from the full moon with the knowledge of what would happen if he hadn’t...

Atou looked away from the Elfuur Sisters, her gaze landing on Elder Moltar and Gia beside them. Her gaze moved further to find civil officials she often saw and Dark Elf citizens she rarely had anything to do with. To cap it all off, even Mynoghra’s Brain Eaters and Homunculus were in the room.

Everyone was here with complaints for Atou to hear. And all their complaints ended up being the same: do something about the freak whose only ability is harassing others instead of doing his job.

There was nothing she could do about *him*.

Is there any chance he’ll start listening if I knock his block off? Atou knew violence wouldn’t solve anything, but she continued to wrack her aching brain for a method to put Vittorio in his place. No matter how much she thought about it, no such method existed. If it did, she would have already made use of it.

Meanwhile, her troubles only escalated.

“W-We’ve got trouble!” Emle shouted as she raced into the room.

I spent hours listening to her complain yesterday. Did Vittorio pick on her again? Atou thought, but seeing Emle panicked caused her to wonder if a real problem had occurred.

“Did something happen?” Atou asked, frowning as she corrected herself. “Or rather, did Vittorio *do* something?”

“He left...”

“Huh?” Atou squawked before her mind completely processed what Emle

meant.

“He left the city and went somewhere without telling anyone!”

“WHAAAAAAT?!” Atou belted out at the top of her lungs.

I screwed up! Her eyes widened with disbelief and her face filled with panic. Vittorio always exceeded her expectations...in the worst possible way. She knew that. She knew that but forgot. No. She knew but turned a blind eye to it. *There’s no way he’ll go that far*, she’d deluded herself.

Harsh reality always crushes false hope.

The boiling pot of trouble she’d put a lid on had finally exploded—and all hell broke loose.

“Did Vittorio say anything?!” Atou asked in hysterics. “He’s not defecting, is he?! Not now of all times?!” She jumped to her feet, but standing didn’t change anything, so she slammed her hands on the table.

Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio is a Hero with an extremely unique disposition, even among all the crazy Heroes within *Eternal Nations*. What makes him so different is that he can’t be controlled. He’s a Hero who belongs to the Player’s empire yet won’t listen to any of the Player’s commands.

I didn’t think his inability to be controlled in the game would rear its ugly head in real life! He’s always been a Hero who doesn’t listen to others, but we’re screwed if we let him go off leash like this!

Heroes who don’t obey commands will act on their own and use their skills at their own discretion. Vittorio has an endless list of troublesome abilities, but the most dangerous is his ability to exercise some of the Player commands. Specifically, it’s possible for him to do all the actions that Commanders can in *Eternal Nations*, such as constructing facilities and unit production, researching and developing tech trees, and establishing cities—all at no cost to the empire.

At first glance, having your empire be developed at no cost sounds like a huge advantage, but it’s actually a double-edged sword.

There is a balance to all things. An order in which things should be done. Choices that should and shouldn’t be made.

A Commander managing an empire selects actions based upon their strategies. These actions work in mutual effect, leading to the prosperity of the Player’s empire and the destruction of enemy empires. Only a child sticks their hands into every pot. Only a child thinks they can have their cake and eat it too. Some choices should be avoided at all costs.

And Vittorio disregards all such logic. He can outright ignore it. Ignore it and do whatever the hell he pleases—to friend and foe.

In other words, his actions can benefit and harm Mynoghra at the same time. Every time he exercises his abilities based on reasoning only he

comprehends, he could be bringing unprecedented disadvantages to Mynoghra.

King Takuto could have controlled Vittorio! Atou lamented. No other Player in Eternal Nations could handle that loose cannon better than King Takuto. That's why that schizoid respected King Takuto so much, and I incorrectly believed he wouldn't do anything too outrageous in opposition to him!

Vittorio was designed to be a schemer. And Takuto made full use of those settings to turn the chaos he wrought into controlled chaos. It was even rumored that the Player Takuto Ira was the one and true master of Vittorio...

But perhaps such sentiments were lost on the Schemester Hero who loved stirring up chaos and confusion. Or perhaps because Vittorio was just such a Hero, he chose to act upon his own set of messed up convictions. He worked his magic best when all hell broke loose.

Defecting from Mynoghra is possible with Vittorio's skills! But, Atou contemplated it, what would be the point? Maybe, just maybe, he left the Accursed Lands with another purpose in mind? If so, what is that faultfinder up to? How in the world will it help King Takuto?

Vittorio's absurd actions were always beyond comprehension. But in his *Eternal Nations'* setting, his actions were all performed with deep insight, wisdom, and a whole lot of mischievousness. Not understanding his reasoning proved that you hadn't made it to the same playing field as Vittorio.

I don't have a single clue what he's after!!

Atou could have overlooked it if he'd taken these actions without any thought. It was because he took every action with some scheme in mind that Atou was experiencing nail-biting panic.

Curse him! I need to calm down first, she told herself. *Trying to understand what's beyond me is a waste of time. Especially when it comes to that schemester Vittorio... Mynoghra's future will be in jeopardy if I don't get it together!*

Without any support from Takuto, Mynoghra's future was solely in Atou's hands. Atou put her brain in full gear and decided to deal with what was actually in her ability to handle. Information gathering was a necessity at times like this. Even the smallest of details can hide a crucial hint.

"We need to sort out the situation first," Atou said. "Do you have any information on him? Even the smallest tidbit is fine."

Atou needed to figure out what had pushed Vittorio to take this action first. So she suppressed the irritation boiling through her veins to fish for information from Emle. She had a feeling the Schemester Hero would leave some kind of goading message for them.

“About that...” Emle said hesitantly, “he left this note.”

“...A note?”

Emle pulled a single piece of stationery from her pocket. The colorfully decorated paper had been delicately folded, looking more like a letter a young girl might prepare for her friend than something written by an evil Hero. But Atou knew the contents sprawled within would be a landmine for Mynoghra. Not some cutesy note like the paper’s appearance would lead you to believe. After all, the writer was none other than *that* Schemester Vittorio...

“Can I see it?” Atou asked. “I need to get as much of a grasp on that schemester’s reasoning as I can.”

“Um, well... I think you would be better off not looking at it...” Emle said awkwardly.

“I don’t care,” Atou stated, her cheeks twitching. “I need to see it. How can I not? As much as I’d rather not...”

Atou had no doubt his letter spent every line mocking her. It was bad enough Emle was hesitant to even let her read it... But there was no way she could ignore the letter when she needed to confirm Vittorio’s intentions. She’d personally rather throw it in the fire and forget all about it so she could return to her daily work.

Atou quietly swallowed the lump in her throat.

Did Vittorio actually defect from Mynoghra?

Did he not revere Takuto after all?

Atou needed to steel herself to accept whatever it was that deceiving Schemester Hero was thinking and leaving for her to clean up after.

To Whom It May Concern:

How are you enjoying the spring weather? Thank you very much for looking after me during my brief stay. It is me, Vittorio, the Hero you all put your hopes in.

Now then, I have a reason for writing a letter like this.

To tell you the truth, I have been on the receiving end of some hardcore bullying. My bullies are none other than everyone living in Mynoghra.

Shall we call it hazing the newcomer? It appears the imbeciles of Mynoghra couldn’t stand being in the presence of a motivated and talented man such as myself. I’ve been harassed in so many ways it isn’t even possible to describe them in a letter such as this.

I’m sure my Sludgy Atou, who lacks observational skills even more than she does breasts, didn’t even notice what was going on. Of course she wouldn’t. For I acted like nothing was wrong. While all along, I was crying on the inside.

I. CRIED (this is key).

But it's a fact that nothing will begin if I just wallow in my despair. Because there is no one else but moi, Vittorio, who can save King Takuto in place of you incompetents who are all talk and no action...

You can do it, me! Don't give in, me!

Hence why I've decided to go on a journey.

Shall we call it a journey of self-discovery?

This is a new step in my life to find a place where I can truly shine.

That's what I really need right now.

For these reasons, I would like to take this opportunity to say adieu for now.

On that note, I'm certain the incompetent Sludgy Atou suspects me of betrayal, but allow me to remind you that I, Vittorio, could never do such a blasphemous thing to King Takuto. Unlike a certain sludge-for-brains Hero who was easily brainwashed into betraying Mynoghra!!

With that said, this is the one and only true confidant to the almighty King Takuto Ira, who will one day rule this world, Vittorio, signing out.

*With much love to my pathetic, sludge tits,
Ta-ta*

"THAT! BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARD!" Atou roared and went into a fit of anger. The wooden table ruptured clean in half with her violent outburst.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Emle, who'd been nervously watching Atou, screamed when she saw her blow up. **"She's lost it! Atou's lost it!"**

Her rage still burning hot, Atou stomped and stomped on the innocent, halved table. With each violent stomp of her feet, sharp cracks pierced the air, and just like that, the meeting room table that had contributed so much to Mynoghra was pitifully reduced to woodchips.

"P-Please calm your rage, Lady Atou! I understand how you feel, but you mustn't take it out on the furniture!"

"That's right! We understand how you feel! We painfully and fully understand your feelings, so please get them under control!"

Elder Moltar and Gia rushed over to appeal directly to Atou's senses. However, their words fell on deaf ears, for Atou had finally blown a gasket after enduring so much abuse and stress due to her position. The more they appealed to her, the more they stoked the flames of her rage.

"THAT DERANGED CLOOOOOWN! ALL HE DOES IS MOCK AND MAKE FUN OF ME! THE NEXT TIME I SEE HIS UGLY FACE I'LL KILL

HIM ON THE SPOT!”

“Retreat!” Gia ordered. “Everyone, withdraw from this room! Escape before she takes it out on you!”

“Hurry! Lady Atou won’t wait for you to be gone!”

The elderly sage and warrior captain were at their wit’s end, but when they saw the tentacles erupt from Atou’s back, they started shouting hasty orders to the others. Upon hearing their orders, everyone made a mad dash for the doors.

The tentacles that had erupted along with Atou’s rage had already obliterated the furniture in the room and were getting to work on the building’s foundation. And even then, her anger did not subside.

“M’kay, Cary and Big Sista are the last ones left. Let’s go, Big Sista.”

“But my candy...”

“CURSE HIM! I’m SOOOOOOOO PISSED! AT LEAST EXPLAIN WHAT YOU’RE SCHEMING, SCHEMESTER! And what’s with him commenting on my...my...my chest! E-Even I...have feelings... Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah...I hate this! I hate working with him! Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! KING TAKUTOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The Elfuur Sisters were the last to nimbly evacuate the room, leaving Atou alone. Atou’s anger didn’t subside even after being abandoned by the others. She began throwing a fit like a child seeking their parent’s attention as she sought the comfort and aid of her absent master...



ON the surface, life had returned to normal for Mynoghra’s town of Dragontan. Being at peace was only natural for the town since there was no need to inform the citizens of the problems plaguing their country. But things were only running this smoothly largely thanks to Antelise, a wandering Elf who served as Dragontan’s mayor. Support from Mynoghra’s army of monsters was limited since the empire-management council was still in a state of disarray, but Dragontan’s residents were working day and night to better the town, and if that’s all someone from the outside looked at, they would see it brimming with activity.

Then came that fateful day when a sticky, lukewarm breeze wormed its way through the town. Just as the sun was about to set, someone visited the home of an ordinary single mother whose husband had abandoned her. Turning her attention to the quiet knocking at the door, the Catkin mother quietly asked

her four-year-old daughter to answer the door for her because she couldn't step away from what she was making in the kitchen.

"Oh my, is that a guest for us?" the mother said. "I'm sorry, Toto. Would you mind getting that for mommy?"

"Uh-huh!" Toto's cat ears and tail flicked happily along with her cheery response. The young girl skipped over to the door and reached up on her tiptoes to open it. "Who might you be?"

The town of Dragontan belonged to Mynoghra. Unlike in the past, when it belonged to Phon'kaven, order was now strictly enforced by the Brain Eaters and the Dragontan Vigilante Corps. Not even a trace of the criminals and thieves that once called it home could be found now.

With safety at an all-time high, there wasn't much to be concerned about allowing her daughter to open the door, but the mother still wondered who might possibly visit their humble abode at this hour. Their family didn't have many friends, so the mother looked curiously toward the door to see her daughter's small hand slowly open it...

"BOO!"

A dangerous man just stuck his head inside the house.

"AAAAAAAHH!" Toto screamed.

His unnaturally elongated limbs were covered by a strange-looking coat. And upon his face was undeniably a fraudster's smile.

The Catkin child had fallen back on her rear end and was staring up in a daze at the creep standing in their doorway.

"U-Um...c-can I help you, sir?"

The mother panicked at the stranger's sudden appearance but used what vestige of calm she had left to rush over and stand protectively in front of her daughter.

The man watched their little display with disturbing interest and then slipped inside the house through the open door.

"Are you haaaappy right noooooow~?"

Vittorio grinned from ear to ear.



Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio

Special Unit

Strength: 0 Move: 3

<<Evil>> <<Hero>> <<Fanatic>> <<Instigate>>
<<Brainwash>> <<Persuade>> <<Intimidate>>
<<Moralize>> <<Convert>> <<Propaganda>>
<<Sabotage>> <<Contaminate Magic>> <<Cultural
Decline>> <<Book Burning>> <<Fraud>>
<<Currency Forgery>> <<Spy>> <<Stealth>>
<<Disguise>> <<Hide>> <<Escape>>

- ※ This Unit can't be controlled.
- ※ This Unit can't fight.
- ※ This Unit can use some Commander commands.
- ※ This Unit can _____



Description

~Not a soul understands the words he spins are leading them to disaster.~

Vittorio is one of Mynoghra's Hero units. This special unit has the oddest abilities of all the game's Heroes, and generally can't be controlled by the Player. In addition to his existing abilities, Vittorio can also use some Commander commands, and will exercise them at the discretion of his AI. The results of his actions can be both advantageous and disadvantageous to the Player, but since he can use all the commands at no cost, he's a ridiculously powerful Hero if you can handle him.



SOME strange things had been spotted recently in Mynoghra's town of Dragontan. Namely, a group of people led by a dubious man clad in nonsensical clothing.

"OOO-KAAAAY! EVERYBOODY! Let me ask you one more tiime! Who is the smartest and coolest god in the wooorld?" the peculiar man asked loudly.

"The Great God Takuto Ira!!" the group replied in unison.

"Mm, very goooooo!!"

Their perfectly uniform and immaculate attire was unsettling, and the fact their numbers were made up of people of all ages, genders, and races gave off a sense of madness. They almost seemed spellbound and out of it, but the dark glint in their eyes intimidated others. The group had gathered around the man and watched him with such intense concentration it seemed as if they were trying to burn his every move into their retinas.

This seemed to be exactly what the man was after. His voice that carried clearly to the far ends of the town had an eerie amount of control over the group.

"Now then, who's the strongest and the most wonderful god in the wooorld?!"

"The Great God Takuto Ira!!" the group repeated.

"Mm, very niiaiiiiice!!"

The group responded in perfect unison, not a single person offbeat. Some of the townspeople watched them with dubious expressions, but the majority didn't want to get involved, so they rushed through the area to their destination.

The group in question didn't care about outsiders one bit. Their gazes were fixed solely on one person. That person's name was Vittorio. He was the infamous Mynoghra Hero known as the Gleeful Spin Doctor.

"I can't *hear* you! Say it more! Say it louder! Extol god! Worship our Lord Takuto Ira! The one and only! The dauntless! The lionized and on the up-and-up! The pulchritudinous genius! Meat-eater! Open 365 days a year! Our God Takuto Ira!!"

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!" the group chanted.

"Wooooooooooooh!"

"Yeaaaaaaaaaah!"

The people roared with joy. At the front of the group the Catkin mother and daughter cheered. They were especially fanatical and zealous. Even your

run-of-the-mill mother and daughter had reached this state. The communal fantasy they were witnessing was surely the most wonderful, most comfortable, and most sacred thing to them.

The cheering never stopped, it only grew louder and more passionate. Surely they could see it—beyond their glassy gazes was the being they revered and adored.

Their cries of joy that were much like a prayer continued ceaselessly. The scene was frenetic, delusional, surreal, and disturbingly abnormal... It was as if they were worshipping an idol.

“Mm-mm-mm! Soooooounding good! Everyone’s cheers will definitely reach God and bear fruit on the day of celebration! Absoooooolutely!!”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!!”

The group’s enthusiasm reached its climax at Vittorio’s comment. Their commotion proudly occupied a corner of the street located in the center of town, but all the sane residents had already left and the shops along the road had closed. Even the guards turned a blind eye to their activities.

“Takuto Ira! Takuto Ira! Our king! Our Commander! Our great god!” Vittorio chanted.

“Takuto Ira! Takuto Ira!!” the group chanted along.

Were they unable to stay put once their excitement reached its peak? The group led by Vittorio began to slowly march somewhere. Where were they heading? Perhaps even they, in the heat of their worship, didn’t know.

The one sure thing was...they were bound to do the same thing wherever they went. Pray to their god and preach about his love. Increasing their followers and scale as they went.

The fanatical cult was like a wave in the raging sea, rolling out to preach their teachings to the poor souls who didn’t know anything about them yet...



WATCHING the commotion from the window of her private office in Town Hall, Antelise Antik, the mayor of Dragontan, had a thoughtful expression on her face.

“What in blue blazes is *that*?” asked the civil officer, gaping at the same scene beside her.

Antelise shifted her gaze to the former guard-turned-secretary beastman at that entirely reasonable question. She shrugged once, an indescribable expression flickering across her pale face.

“He’s a new Hero...or so it seems,” she said. “Strange one, isn’t he?”

Antelise had already been informed about Vittorio. Atou was the only Hero she had ever spoken to directly. It took some mental preparation to accept the turmoil that was currently being caused by the new Hero called Vittorio after getting used to Atou. Antelise’s grimace reflected her internal turmoil.

“Well, he’s something else, I’d say. But a new religion? Really? I’m surprised you allowed it, Mayor Antelise.”

Dragontan already had an indigenous religion centered around worshipping ancestral spirits, which had continued even after being ceded from Phon’kaven to Mynoghra. Allowing a new religion to spread normally requires careful consideration by the local government because it can give rise to various problems with different interests at stake. But this cult sprung up without going through any red tape.

“It’s not really something we can deny, and it’s up to the individual really,” Antelise said. “Plus, everyone’s so lenient here. This is Mynoghra we’re talking about.”

Truth be told, Antelise didn’t give permission at first. The so-called new Hero already got the cult up and going without her realizing it. She immediately called for him and demanded an explanation and that he cease such activities at once... However, before she knew it, she’d been persuaded by him and even granted permission.

“What did the higher-ups at the capital have to say?”

“They want to wait and see how it plays out,” Antelise said. “It seems he was too much for them to handle as well. I was strictly ordered to report back on every little thing he does.”

Even with all of Antelise’s flaws, she was a key figure who’d been given the position of town mayor. She didn’t mean to toot her own horn, but she knew she was somewhat important within Mynoghra. And that was why she sensed something incredibly off about how easily Vittorio had persuaded her to do his bidding. She’d contacted Atou immediately after the fact, only for the other Hero to grudgingly sign off on Vittorio’s plans as well. Antelise couldn’t shake the feeling that Vittorio was pulling some weird strings to force everything to go the way he wanted.

“Uh-huh, sounds like a pain to me... Whoops, we’ve been talking too long. Need anything else from me?”

“No, not at the moment,” Antelise responded.

“Gotcha. Then, until next time.”

“Yeah, thanks. See you.”

The door quietly closed behind her secretary, leaving Antelise alone in the

office.

“Rather than waiting to see what he does, it seems more like they don’t have the time or energy to deal with him,” Antelise muttered to herself.

That was a matter that should never be heard or spoken of. Mynoghra was facing a crisis only its top governing officials could know about. But Antelise was more concerned about the problems at hand.

Antelise became lost in thought as she shamelessly poured herself a cup of hard liquor. *Still...he’s up to some strange stuff, that Hero. There’s not a single citizen of Mynoghra who doesn’t already revere King Takuto Ira. What’s the point of twisting that into a full-blown religion?*

All who became citizens of Mynoghra were instilled with loyalty to the king without exception. Their loyalty grew by the day and was bolstered by his godly achievements and their peaceful lives. Even Antelise, who’d experienced visceral fear toward the king at first, wasn’t the least bit scared of him now. She did feel nervous, but that was more akin to the nervous feeling anyone gets when faced with someone amazing. Everyone living in Dragontan should be experiencing the same high level of loyalty to King Takuto Ira and Mynoghra.

Antelise tilted back her cup, sending the strong spirits searing down her throat straight to the pit of her stomach. As she listened to the chants coming from outside the window, she became intoxicated by the taste of the alcohol that Takuto personally gifted her.

Atou told me in no uncertain terms that this Hero, Vittorio, is a scheming puppeteer. In which case, everything he does must serve some greater purpose in his schemes... The question is, what purpose?

At first glance, his actions in Dragontan seemed pointless. No matter how many townspeople he converted into believers, it was a limited population already devoted to Mynoghra. Was he trying to spread the religion to other countries? That made the most sense but didn’t seem well thought out.

Qualia already had a religion worshipping the Holy God Arlos, and Phon’kaven had its indigenous beliefs. Dragontan’s townspeople easily accepted it because of their preexisting loyalty to King Takuto Ira—the same couldn’t be said for the other nations. Other governments seemed more likely to designate it as a prohibited religion. Anyone with a brain should be able to see that religious countries like Qualia and El-Nah would take prompt measures against it.

Antelise couldn’t fathom why he’d start a religion in Dragontan. It wasn’t necessary. It was a waste of time.

Well, it’s not like I know everything there is to know about the power and sway religion has over people. Maybe there’s a surprising reason for it. It’s just my luck, though...all these issues coming one after another. They say birds of a

feather flock together, but does that also apply to trouble?

Antelise sighed. Drunkenness was her only solace in difficult times.

Antelise had no clue what stance Atou and the Dark Elves actually held on Vittorio's actions back at Mynoghra's capital in the Accursed Lands. From the response she got from Atou in their letter exchange, it was clear Vittorio was a source of chaos beyond their control.

And Vittorio wasn't their only concern.

Negotiations and an open dialogue needed to be maintained with Phon'kaven, and strengthening the military capabilities of both countries was an urgent task considering the current national crisis.

Things seemed calm to the north, east, and south for the time being. But there was no telling when someone with sinister designs would appear again. And when they did...would Mynoghra be able to handle them in their current state? All this information and knowledge that was more than necessary for someone who was just the mayor of a small town depressed Antelise.

But the biggest crisis of all is that King Takuto is bedridden with amnesia we don't know the cause of yet.

Antelise was lucky her stomach acid didn't burn a hole in her stomach from all the stress she experienced after being hit with that devastating reality right after experiencing the relief of knowing they had gotten Atou back and defeated the Divine Nation of Lenea. It was also a blessing in disguise that she was able to remain calm in front of her subordinates, conceal the truth, and prevent information leaks since finding out.

Yes, not dying from stress and being able to keep up appearances were two very small blessings in an ocean of misfortune of which she didn't even know the true scale.

Antelise let out another bitter sigh. *And here I thought I'd have it easy. Don't tell me this world is a thousand times more dangerous than I ever realized? I would've preferred the bliss of ignorance on that front.*

The more she thought about it, the more depressed she became, speeding up the rate at which she knocked back her drink.

That being that... she thought, deciding to change gears. *Nothing will change if I just drown myself in drink. I've got my issues, but I'm still Dragontan's Mayor. If there's still something I can do, then I'd better do everything in my power to make it happen. I'll make it happen.*

Antelise downed the rest of her cup and stood up as the alcohol burned down her throat.

"Let's do this! Anybody there? Heeeeeeeey!"

And so, she made up her mind to act. Her first action was to call for her

staff. She was the type to put ideas into motion. Her ability to take initiative at the drop of a hat was one of the reasons why she was highly valued. Unfortunately, there were times when this part of her personality manifested itself in the more negative direction of slacking off at work...

"I can hear you even if you don't shout like a madwoman, Miss Mayor," her secretary grumbled. "Sheesh. If you needed me, you should've just said so when I was in here earlier..."

"Quit your nagging. I just thought up what I need! Like, just now!" Antelise complained.

Unlike the capricious Antelise, her subordinates didn't even comprehend the notion of slacking off from work. As soon as she called for them, they answered, and her secretary appeared back in her office with a disgruntled look.

"So, what do you need?" he asked.

"Mm, can you get a horse and guard detail ready for me?"

"Oh? Where are you going?" he asked with a curious expression. He'd normally nag her with, "*You skipping out on work again?*" But he'd accurately guessed that she was actually going out for work this time.

People who can sense what their boss wants without it having to be said are effective as secretaries. Coupled with the fact that he wasn't afraid to ask her the important questions spoke to the reality that this former guard had developed into a very capable subordinate. Antelise nodded with satisfaction at his growth.

"To the Accursed Lands. I've got some stuff to ask Atou about directly."

"For you to go all the way to the capital just for that... Did something big happen?"

"No, it's just..." Antelise gasped and said nothing further.

She didn't need to tell him more, and he shouldn't learn anything more. Her thoughts must have shown on her face because her secretary said, "I know what you need. I'll get it readied at once." He bowed and quietly withdrew from the room.

As Antelise watched his retreating form, she was reminded once again of what a good subordinate she had and felt gratitude for his perceptiveness. Knowing him, he might've already picked up on what was going on from the conversations he'd been having with Antelise and how she'd been behaving.

The Nameless Religion, eh? That seems like a name to me, but what's the purpose of it? Antelise wondered.

It'd only been about three days since Vittorio came to Dragontan. And yet the number of believers was increasing at an exponential rate. They were just a gathering of weirdos right now, but what if their numbers exploded? What if their proselytizing reached beyond Mynoghra? What if their propagation

exceeded her expectations and succeeded elsewhere like it did in Dragontan...?

Chaos would ensue across the continent.

Antelise was nearly certain her doubts were becoming a reality.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

A religion has been established in Dragontan.

~~ Cult of Ira ~~

Praise the great god, Takuto Ira! Praise be to the eternal,
immortal, absolute god! There is no god before or after him.
Extol the name of the one and only god!

Pray without ceasing until the awaited day of celebration!

OK

Chapter 4: Comeback

BECAUSE she's a Hero, because she's a Witch, people falsely believe her mind is as tough as her physical body. However, even Heroes have hearts. Their mindset and thinking differ from the average mortal, but that doesn't mean they are freestanding beings who never get hurt.

The same holds true for the Hero known as Sludge Atou.

"King Takuto..." she softly called his name. "How are you feeling today?"

Ever since the day she returned to Mynoghra with Takuto, Atou had visited the room where her master rested every chance she got. She couldn't relax unless she saw him—she'd always had a Takuto-first mentality that placed her at his side twenty-four-seven, even when he was healthy. She had an even greater need to see his face with Vittorio constantly giving her a headache with his antics.

Just the other day, Antelise had come in person to give Atou an urgent report about the establishment of the Cult of Ira and its unsavory activities. Atou understood she was more than a few steps behind Vittorio, but she couldn't take immediate action to stop him. Although she felt terrible for sending Antelise back with just a "Wait-and-see how things unfold," Atou had her hands full with her own problems.

And so, her daily routine of checking on Takuto became her only solace.

Takuto still wasn't himself—he was barely conscious or aware most of the time. But now that she'd gotten past her initial shock over his condition and was preoccupied fretting over a million other issues, Atou had another reason for coming to his room aside from simply seeing how he was doing.

"Ugggggh~~! I don't wanna work, King Takutooooo... To think using your brain this much for work could be this draining! You really are amazing for always thinking up so many brilliant strategies all the time."

Atou dove onto the bed where Takuto rested and rolled around beside him. Fortunately, the bed was larger than king-size since it was built for a real king. Diving onto the bed and kicking up a fuss did nothing to disturb her sleeping master.

If everything was normal, she would've never been capable of doing such an embarrassing thing and wouldn't have even considered it. But Atou had grown bolder with Takuto's memories and consciousness being obfuscated.

Yes, she was using the pretext of checking on Takuto to get her fill of him without worrying about the peanut gallery.

“And curse that sniveling schemester!” she huffed. “I don’t know what he’s scheming... I’m all for a religion that worships you, King Takuto, but there are other things he should be focusing on first.”

What the Heroes—no, all the beings living in Mynoghra should be focusing on now was contributing to Takuto’s revival. Atou was putting every effort into trying to find anything she could do to help. She couldn’t help thinking that Vittorio’s actions and his unclear intentions made it seem like he had his priorities mixed up.

“It’s too depressing to think that I’ll have to interrogate him very soon. Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to replenish my King Takuto reserves to suppress my anger.” Atou deeply inhaled, then exhaled. “Mm, your scent always calms me down. It makes me want to just sleep here right next to you...”

Atou had her way with Takuto because no one—the young man himself included—was looking. She buried her face in the sheets and breathed in deeply, reveling in her master’s natural smell. She began to doze off for a few minutes before she snapped back to her senses and pried her face from the sheets.

“But I mustn’t do that! Mynoghra will be ruined if I’m not there to stop it. Even worse, I can see that perverted fraudster twisting it and warping it into a disturbingly delightful country that makes no sense to anybody but him and his delusional ideals!! The only one who can stop that from happening is King Takuto’s true confidant—me, Atou!!” Atou declared with a huff of determination, chastising herself to get a move on.

I’ve got a million things to do. I’ve more than rested during this brief respite with King Takuto. Now I’ve just got to do my very best.

Mynoghra’s situation wasn’t optimistic, and Atou’s efforts were necessary to lead the empire to a better future. Atou turned toward Takuto, hoping to burn her beloved master’s handsome vestige into her mind’s eye one last time before getting to work.

“Everything rests on my efforts. Isn’t that right, King Takuto?!”

That’s when...

“Th-That’s right...Atou.”

“Huh?”

...she made eye contact with Takuto and his wry smile.

“Uh, um, huh? Er, urp, w-wa-wow!”

Atou was mystified and in shock.

W-WA-WOW



It wasn't a mistake or her imagination. She wasn't hallucinating or daydreaming. Those eyes filled with purpose and wisdom were undeniably Takuto's, and the sight of him looking at her lazing on his bed with a slightly troubled expression was precisely what she'd been yearning for.

"Good morning. Sorry for worrying you."

At those words, Atou suddenly remembered how silly she was being on his bed and her face turned beet red. She panicked and tried to come up with an excuse, but a joyful smile blossomed on her face the moment it hit home that Takuto's consciousness had returned. In the end, large tears filled her crimson eyes...

"Vittorio's been bullying meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

"Ah...ahahahaha..."

The dam she'd been holding back burst and she clung to Takuto in tears. It's said that when someone is put through too much hardship, their mind regresses to an infantile state to protect itself, and Atou seemed to be going through such a phenomenon right now.

Not even Takuto could comment on it. Dealing with this right after regaining consciousness only baffled him. He could only force a smile as he watched Atou acting so very unlike the Mynoghra Hero she was.



TAKUTO placated the grumpy Atou and put her in a better mood. Even though she did it for Takuto, Atou's decision to summon Vittorio was too much for her to handle. Takuto had a troubled expression the entire time he was comforting her, but his joy over reuniting with her again showed through it all.

After a few minutes, Atou finally calmed down and jerked her head up from where she buried it in his chest.

"King Takuto!" she cried, looking him over to make sure he was well. "Should you really be sitting up?! Are you feeling all right?! I'm...worried you might fall back into the same condition you've been in all this time..."

The joy of reuniting with Takuto had caused her to briefly forget about everything else, but Takuto's health was Mynoghra's highest priority. His memories seemed to be fully intact and he looked healthy at the moment. But Atou was afraid he'd suddenly forget about her again.

What caused Takuto to lose his memories was a mystery, and what caused his memories to return was an even greater mystery. Being concerned for Takuto's well-being was only natural for his subordinate and should come first.

“Yeah, you can relax,” Takuto reassured her. “We don’t have to worry about that again. Well, there’s still some stuff I have to deal with, but I don’t think it’ll affect me like it has until now. Anyway, can you tell me everything that happened while I was out of it?”

“...If you’re certain, then all right. I’ll tell you everything that has transpired while you were away, my king.” She was concerned about the remaining problems he alluded to, but Atou put a lid on those feelings and gave him the report he sought from her.

Takuto was usually kind, but he was also stubborn. If he said he was okay, then no amount of pestering him would get him to say more. Atou was certain there was more to it, but she’d known him—in this world and the last—for a long time. And they had built a relationship of trust and understanding that didn’t always need words. So Atou set her worries aside and focused on accurately recalling everything that had happened so she wouldn’t leave a single detail out.

She started back at everything that had happened in Mynoghra since Takuto lost his memories, beginning with the first actions they took. Then she summarized Vittorio’s actions from when he was summoned until his sudden disappearance.

Takuto intently listened to Atou’s report with a calm expression that only cracked into something a little more pensive during the last bit on Vittorio. He occasionally looked away in contemplation—the usual gesture he made when considering tactics. By the end of her report, he slowly rose from the bed, stretched with a groan, and then gave his response.

“All things considered... Vittorio, huh? I figured as much.”

That was all Atou needed to hear to realize everything that had happened was already a part of Takuto’s plans, and even Vittorio’s summoning was expected.

“D-Don’t tell me you expected I’d seek help from Vittorio?!” Atou cried.

“Yeah, it’s one of the routes I had planned for. It must have been a hard decision for you. Thanks, Atou.”

“Y-You needn’t thank me!” Atou blurted and waved her hands in front of her face in a panic.

Just hearing him thank her was enough to make up for all the suffering she put up with. She’d never been angrier or more mentally exhausted than during her time alone with Vittorio. But now all that suffering had become just a dash of spice to her bliss.

Atou’s love and respect for Takuto grew with the knowledge that the decision she’d made with unyielding resolve, and even Vittorio’s questionable

actions, were all calculated for. The results spoke for themselves.

The result was undeniable: Takuto was back.

Atou had no idea what method Vittorio had used to pull it off. Takuto's resurrection must've resulted from a complex intertwining of schemes beyond her understanding. It vexed her to admit it, but Vittorio's cunning was the real deal that pulled off this miracle.

But who cared about that dark manipulator who embodied ingenious scheming when he was just another pawn who danced to the tune of Takuto's divine schemes?

Atou's good mood ballooned, reaching a climax of joy, happiness, and excitement. Victory was theirs. All that was left to do was to summon that self-serving swindler here and have Takuto harshly reprimand him for his disrespect. While she envisioned herself cackling with glee beside Takuto as he laid into Vittorio, Atou rejoiced that everything was going perfectly according to Takuto's plan.

I feel like a fool for worrying about the ridiculous cult that jester established! Atou thought with a laugh. *I found it inconvenient for it to be a nameless religion, so I officially named it The Cult of Ira, but that doesn't matter anymore!*

Atou was a bundle of excitement. Her eyes sparkled with glee, and she jumped up and down like a child who couldn't wait to go to an amusement park. This was all just one of the thousands of strategies floating in Takuto's mind, and everything was proceeding smoothly under his artful direction—that's what she wholeheartedly believed.

"I wouldn't expect any less from you, King Takuto!" she chirped in a singsong voice. "You're simply amazing in every way! I can't believe you had already taken steps to recover from that state! Your Atou didn't even realize it! I'm awed by the display of your genius as *Eternal Nations*' Number 1 player!"

"Hahaha!" Takuto laughed. "You give me too much credit, Atou. There's no denying I was in a real dangerous situation there... Plus, we ended up borrowing Vittorio's help."

"But you'd even planned for that, didn't you? What a riot it is to see that creepy court jester dance in the palm of your hand! I was certainly worried when he'd established a religion with you as the god and started a bizarre daily festival, but now I know even that was your plan!" Atou blurted out at the speed of light, letting her excitement get the better of her.

This was Takuto she was dealing with. She was certain he'd anticipated every single one of Vittorio's actions and that he'd nod along with a knowing smile. Except...

“Huh? Wait a minute. What the hell is that guy doing?”

“...WHAT?!”

Takuto’s dead serious tone and expression ruined any chance that he was joking. Atou was shocked by his response and didn’t know how to process what he was saying. But it hit home when she saw his awkward smile—this young man rarely reacted emotionally when it came to his strategies.

The silence gave them enough time to think things over calmly. And once they did...

Are things actually going in a bad direction...?

Atou and Takuto. Strangely enough, the thoughts that ran through the minds of this master and servant, who were finally reunited after a long separation and much hardship, were the same...

No one knew what kind of strategy Vittorio had employed.

Chapter 5: Command

THIS is what happened after the sudden and strange miraculous revival of Takuto. Or more like, this was only the beginning of what came next.

In the Accursed Land, news of Takuto's resurrection was immediately shared, and those who knew the situation rushed to the Palace to celebrate his comeback.

The return of Mynoghra's King.

Everyone had longed to restore their king to full health, and although they had explored various means and methods to make it happen, it was a challenge with no answer in sight. His revival was the very definition of a miracle.

"Your Majesty! Are you feeling well enough to be up and about?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine now. Sorry for worrying you."

Mynoghra's Palace—the Throne Room. When was the last time they had conversed here? In the Throne Room, where all Takuto's main subordinates had gathered for the first time in a long time, excited energy charged the room.

"My king!" Gia roared. "My men and I have been training night and day for this moment! The Dark Elf Riflemen are at your disposal! Just say the word!"

"Alas, it appears it was disrespectful of insignificant beings such as us to try and wrap our heads around what ailed our mighty king," Elder Moltar said. "I'm downright ashamed of my hubris in thinking that I could heal the king."

Gia and Elder Moltar were as devout as ever to Takuto and their joy at his return was immeasurable.

"I-I'm so glad to see you well... I'll inform Miss Antelise at once!" Emle said. Although she didn't play a conspicuous role during this incident, she was the unsung hero who supported Mynoghra's unstable foundation. Her true colors could be seen through her desire to immediately inform her friend—Antelise—of the good news.

"Yippee!"

"We can relax now that he's better, huh, Big Sista?"

The Elfuur Sisters seemed just as happy as the rest. Becoming Witches caused significant changes to their mentality, but it didn't change who they were at their core. When it came down to it, the twins adored Takuto and sincerely prayed for him to return to the king they knew and loved. They didn't want to

lose anyone dear to them again—that was an undeniable piece of who they were.

“Keep your comments brief! After all! This trifling incident was nothing to our king! I ALWAYS knew that King Takuto would get better!”

And then there was Atou. Although she chided the others for rejoicing, she couldn’t hide the joy blossoming on her young face. To a third party, she looked like the happiest person in the room.

After that, Takuto was inundated with all sorts of comments celebrating his return from the Dark Elves and subordinates who served as the backbone of Mynoghra’s government. It was a tad—no, extremely—embarrassing for him, but he understood where they were coming from. So he did his best to respond in kind within the limits of his social awkwardness.



WITH the celebration out of the way, it was time to settle down and dive into the sea of thought. Takuto was relieved he could finally get things back in order. When he thought about it, he’d been dealing with a succession of issues ever since making contact with Dragontan.

First came the Barbarian invasion from the southern part of the Dark Continent, followed by the appearance of hostile forces in the form of *Brave Questers’* Demon Lord Army. Just when he thought he had that problem underfoot, his next enemy—the TRPG forces—showed up. Their surprise attack and the series of nightmarish events that followed kept him busy after that. This ultimately culminated in Takuto becoming so exhausted he stopped functioning and had to rest until now.

The world at large was still in a state of chaos.

There were other Players and the entities pulling the strings behind them. And then there was the promised final battle with everything on the line waiting in the wings. In addition to managing the empire realistically, he had to deal with paranormal phenomena.

But that was nothing new to Takuto. He’d already faced a myriad of challenging opponents. It didn’t matter to him whether those opponents were within the confines of the game known as *Eternal Nations* or reality. If he were faced with an opponent, he’d crush them. End of story.

Takuto renewed his resolve to take back everything that was stolen from him.

“Okay, let’s get straight to work then!!” Takuto announced.

It was time to get back to the basics. First came Domestic Affairs.

Domestic Affairs came above all else. For all the problems they were facing, they couldn't neglect the foundation of empire management. This was especially true given the current situation.

"Then I'll return your Commander authority at once, King Takuto. Please teach that conniving Vittorio a lesson!" Atou supplicated with her hands on her hips and a full-face smile a child might have when they finally get their way.

Granting Atou proxy Commander authority was only a temporary measure. With it, Atou could give various Domestic Affairs commands, such as constructing buildings, unit production, and diplomacy, but she couldn't share unit vision or send telepathic instructions like Takuto. Returning this authority early on was crucial to maximizing the system's capabilities. Of course, Atou felt a greater need to return what always belonged with Takuto than simply the practical application.

Takuto being Commander was Mynoghra's greatest and most powerful weapon. There was no reason not to reinstate him.

However...

"Yeah, about that... I'm still not back to full health yet, so would you mind holding onto the Commander authority for now?" Takuto asked.

"Wha-?" Atou squeaked. "A-Are you sure?"

Atou felt like she'd just been doused in ice water. Even the others looked taken aback.

"Yup. Positive. To be honest, the power I used to get you back is what caused me to get sick. Seems like it's problematic to use it repeatedly. I want to devote my time to recovering a bit more first if possible."

"Does that mean...you will be okay with time, my liege?" Elder Moltar interjected himself into the conversation despite knowing he was stepping out of turn.

Although Takuto had recovered, they still didn't know how or why. And while Elder Moltar had absolute faith in the king, his position naturally caused him to worry about what might go awry.

"Yeah, I'll be all good if I can rest a bit. I'm not asking for years here. Let's see..." Takuto stopped to calculate the necessary time. **"I think a whole month should do the trick. You can just think of it as something along the lines of suffering from muscle pain or running out of Mana."**

"That makes sense," Elder Moltar nodded. "Then we must add even more guards to your personage."

"I don't think you need to go to such lengths myself," Takuto said dismissively, but everyone else was determined to provide him better protection. They were dogged in their determination to protect Takuto this time around.

“It’s a pain not to see the units or communicate telepathically with them, but *this* is the most important thing for a Commander,” Takuto tapped his head. **“The mind. And that’s the one thing you don’t have to worry about.”**

“We were never worried!” Atou insisted. “Now then, King Takuto, please give me your esteemed orders!”

“Hahaha, thanks for that.”

Everyone bowed deeply to him, celebrating their king’s return and reinstatement as their leader. Mynoghra was back in action despite the various problems it had to overcome.

And it should never be forgotten that *Eternal Nations* is a 4x empire-management strategy game. In other words, an empire’s size and national power increase as time passes.



“ALL right, you guys, it’s Domestic Affairs Time!” Takuto declared in high spirits.

Every resident of Mynoghra desired for their country to prosper, but it was none other than Takuto who showed the strongest devotion and fixation on such matters. He loved Domestic Affairs Time more than anything else.

“I’ve already got a general grasp of the domestic situation,” Takuto continued. **“A few points need to be corrected, so let’s work on those first.”**

At Takuto’s command, the giant beast known as the empire lifted its lumbering head from whence it slumbered and lurched forward once more. Takuto already had a strategy worked out—all he had to do was make the appropriate adjustments and give commands. First, he decided to assess the situation to ensure there weren’t any discrepancies with his information.

“Just to confirm, we can’t construct any new Facilities yet, right?” he asked. **“Elder Moltar, we haven’t made any progress with Research either, yeah?”**

“Correct, my king,” Elder Moltar responded at once. “We’ve completed research on the Six Major Elements and put the next research tier on hold. However, based on what we have learned from prior experience, it’s my humble opinion that researching any kind of new technology will take a long time.”

Compared to the vigor the Dark Elves had shown when welcoming back their king, the response to their first real task seemed to take the wind right out of their sails. Takuto couldn’t fault them for it when Mynoghra’s empire-management wasn’t producing the results he wanted due specifically to this

research. It wasn't due to incompetence on the side of Elder Moltar and the Dark Elves.

It had everything to do with the commonly known and irrefutable fact that new technology can't be developed overnight. Rome wasn't built in a day. Takuto actually felt like he should praise them for completing the research tiers for Military Magic and the Six Major Elements in the time since he came to this world.

But it just wasn't enough.

"The current bottleneck for Mynoghra is our lack of technology," Atou said. "It doesn't matter how many subordinates and facilities we have, we can't produce more if we don't have the foundational technology in place..."

Atou had summarized the problem perfectly.

Facilities with various capabilities. Magic capable of creating various miracles. And Heroes who wield a variety of abilities. No matter how much potential and overwhelming power each of these have, they are no better than paperweights if they can't be used.

The weakness of *Eternal Nations*, which usually has players manage an empire in units of several years, or even decades, lay in its inability to deal with time. And this weakness became a critical flaw when it came to the battles waged in this new world.

Mynoghra had already constructed all the Facilities that had been unlocked with their current tier of research. Some buildings were still under construction in Dragontan, but they were duplicates of what already existed in the Accursed Lands and didn't do much to change the current situation.

Simply put, Mynoghra could not grow due to the great shackles of Technology.

But even that shackle was—

"Oh, right, I forgot to mention this, but I've stolen a tech tree, so we're all good."

—easily unlocked by Takuto's genius.

As all eyes focused on him, Takuto pulled several scrolls out of thin air. The bundles of parchment were packed with vigorously written text that was underlined and emphasized in different ways throughout, proving even at a glance that the information contained within was important.

"Smelting, Theater, Fish Farming, Fortress Building, Advanced Hunting," Takuto read off the titles. **"Their Religion tech tree was way too different from ours, so it was impossible to pilfer, but I swiped every last piece of tech we can use."**

A surprised silence dominated the room, and before anyone could blink,

the scrolls formed a precarious pile on the table. Every bundle of parchment was a Tech Book into which the holy nations had poured their blood, sweat, and tears. Each filled with the most crucial national secrets that must never be let out of the vault, and especially never allowed into the hands of another nation.

Collecting these was a move made with artistic foresight and strategy, as if in preparation for this inevitable future. Even Atou, who had long witnessed Takuto's preeminence in such sleights of hand, couldn't hide her surprise.

"Wh-When did you—" Atou stuttered. "Don't tell me you snatched it when I think you did?!"

Takuto gave a slight nod, indicating she was correct.

When Takuto infiltrated the Divine Nation of Lenea, he used the Nameless Evil God's Perfect Imitation ability to become the Saints and collect information. During that time, he used the full authority of the Saints to steal everything of use they had—including their researched technology.

He had used his one move of retrieving Atou to create a ripple effect, gaining him other benefits and results. This was why Takuto was hailed as the most talented player in *Eternal Nations*.

While Takuto was pulling all of this off, Atou just whittled away the time without accomplishing anything, but fortunately for her, no one dared to point it out and her honor went unquestioned. When it came down to it, Atou was more suited to being a subordinate than a leader, and she was the type who was rather useless without Takuto.

"...With this, we've solved part of our research problems. It's a shame there isn't much progress for our main Magic tech tree, but just obtaining these massively opens up the number of Facilities we can construct now. So let's start with that first."

While his subordinates were awash with feelings of awe, shock, and indescribable fear at his most recent feat, Takuto had already decided on his next policy. To him, this small achievement was nothing to write home about. He simply did it because he could. Period.

"Here's the policies I've decided on," Takuto announced. "First, we'll construct Sumptuous Meat Forest and Grotesque Zoo in the Accursed Lands and Dragontan using Emergency Production. In Dragontan, we'll also add on Training Grounds, Magic Research Institute, Market, Clinic, Workshop, and Circus Tent."

The room was inundated with a flood of information. Naturally each facility had a purpose—it wasn't just a simple matter of constructing things willy-nilly because they could. Just like when Takuto pilfered Lenea's tech tree, each of his choices were made looking two to three steps, or even further, into

the future.

“As for Research...” he paused for a brief moment. **“Let’s change course to Medical Science. Once that’s done, we’ll research Medical Magic to build a Closed Ward. We can address the time it’ll take later.”**

Takuto barreled on with his explanation, forgetting to care if the others followed him. Emle and Elder Moltar hastily scribbled down his instructions on the pad of paper placed in front of each meeting participant. They didn’t miss a single word so that they could parse it and ask him about his intentions later on. They couldn’t waste time thinking about it now.

“Oh, and let’s raise the Palace level by 1. We’ve met the tech and empire-size conditions for it. And we can think about unit production details later, but we should aim to strike a balance first. Botchlings are strong but cost an arm and a leg, so we’ll produce one in each terrain for a total of two.”

Another outpouring of terms beyond their comprehension. They could more or less guess that Botchling referred to a new subordinate, but the name alone told them nothing about its function or appearance. But the ominous nature of Takuto’s words made the Dark Elves certain a being more powerful than them was about to be created.

“And that’s what I have in mind,” Takuto finished. **“Let me know if you have any questions.”**

All I have are questions... is what every Dark Elf thought first. They wanted to ask for an explanation about each of the many foreign terms Takuto had tossed around.

Many of Mynoghra’s facilities drastically differed in appearance and function from what the average nation constructed. Each facility had its own special ability that affected the empire and city just by building it there. Therefore, knowing the facility’s purpose was impossible based on the name alone.

And that was why Takuto’s comment was directed to Atou alone.

“S-Sounds costly. Can we afford it?”

Atou’s question was straightforward and cursory. But it was also the easiest concept for the Dark Elves to understand.

Takuto seemed satisfied by her query and launched into an explanation as if he were waiting for her to lob it his way. **“Honestly? Nope. I mean, it’ll drain our coffers dry. It’ll be the end of the bonus we’ve been getting from all the gold coins we got off the Demon Lord’s Army. We’ll be stuck relying on tax revenue after that.”**

Put another way, spending all the gold coins left over from *Brave Questers*

was worth it for this plan. Anyone could see that they could save the gold coins as a trump card if they continued using the cheat-like feature of Mynoghra's Market to convert them into Mana. But Takuto was throwing that card away for a better hand. Atou and even the Dark Elves naturally understood the gravity of his decision.

The room fell so silent you could hear a pin drop. This silence was in complete endorsement of the king's decision.

"Then we will begin construction at once," Atou said. "As for Dragontan, I'll need to go there in person since I still hold commandership. I'll also get that done promptly."

"Sounds good. Thanks," Takuto responded tersely, stretching his arms high over his head. Everyone panicked when they heard his joints pop from inactivity, but he held up his hand to stop them from fussing over him and instead brought up something he had just remembered. **"Oh yeah, I'll buy us some time by sending an official letter to Phon'kaven explaining things and seeking their cooperation. It'll be hard for them to keep the peace without the military power provided by Mynoghra's firearms. I feel bad, but let's milk them for what they're worth."**

No one opposed the idea. Only Emle felt a tinge of concern for the position that would put Antelise in, but she figured Takuto would have that covered and decided not to bring it up.

"On to other Foreign Affairs," Takuto began, **"I'm concerned about the Divine Nation of Lenea's Saints, but...it seems like they were able to make a clean getaway for now. I have a feeling they're hiding somewhere in the Dark Continent. But they don't deserve much attention from us. Only a tragic fate awaits religious figures abandoned by their nation."**

A look of concern crossed Atou's face. Was she worried that leaving an old enemy in the wild might turn into a dagger in their backs later? Or was it a twinge of pity for those she had shared a short-lived but memorable alliance with?

"Well, you can take your minds off the Divine Nation of Lenea," Takuto told them. **"The groundwork I laid kicked in just in time. They don't have a smidgen of leeway to try anything funny now. And I doubt Qualia will neglect Lenea to come after us just yet."**

The Elfuur Sisters murmured "Uh-huh" in response.

The groundwork he laid dealt with what he'd ordered the twin Witches to do. Namely, spread Plague and Addle through the land. They used their abilities not only on the Paladins, but also throughout the cities, and the affliction continued to this day.

The whole territory had to be in a sorry state by now.

But that didn't mean squat to the twins. From the bottom of their hearts, they didn't care.

“The only thing I’m concerned about is the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals and the Succubus Army...” Takuto said, then smacked his hands together. **“Oh, right, I haven’t told you guys about that yet.”**

Takuto had obtained many things when he infiltrated the Divine Nation of Lenea as High Paladin Verdel. One of the most important was information on the state of things in the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals—information on the Succubus Army and the Witch known as Queen Succubus Vagia.

In all likelihood, they were under a Player, but Takuto had no idea what game they were from. In any case, the important thing was that El-Nah was ruled by Succubi now and the Holy Kingdom of Qualia was slow to act because they had their hands full dealing with them.

Takuto shared all this information with his subordinates to update them.

“Spirits!” Elder Moltar cursed in surprise, his eyes growing wide. “To think the Elven nation has fallen into such shambles...! If this is true, we need to be even more prepared for a fight, my king.”

“I plan to have Phon’kaven act as our bulwark for a while,” Takuto responded calmly to Elder Moltar’s hasty suggestion.

Elder Moltar gasped, then deeply bowed his head to Takuto. He was impressed that Takuto’s decision to leave the borderland territory to Phon’kaven was for this purpose. He had nothing further to say when he realized this was all a part of his king’s divine plans.

Takuto inclined his head, satisfied with the sage’s response. The plan had been put in motion at Takuto’s direction, but Phon’kaven took him up on the offer understanding as much.

“As it stands, we need to reward them for all the work they’ve put in.”

Phon’kaven had also formed a united front with Mynoghra against the Divine Nation of Lenea. Making only one-sided demands of their ally would damage Mynoghra’s prestige with them. Takuto suggested the Spirit of Ruin as a solution to this problem.

Planned to be put into production soon, this new Magic Unit could utilize the Earth Mana generated by Dragontan’s Dragon Vein Mine. And then there was the Military Magic made possible by the Earth Mana: Nullify Terrain. Just as its name indicates, this spell removes any Terrain status effects and changes it into an ordinary piece of land. It has the disadvantage of canceling out even positive effects, making it seem rather useless in most situations.

However, in the barren land of the Dark Continent, this spell shines like no

other. It's easy to understand its value by imagining greenery returning to the endless expanse of desolate fields. Ordinariness can sometimes be the most valuable. This spell was lacking compared to higher-tier Terrain Enhancements, but it'd hold untold value to Phon'kaven, whose territory mainly consisted of unusable wasteland.

Takuto intended to repay them by dispatching this unit. They had suffered a great many hardships due to their infertile land. He was convinced this gift would have an immediate impact.

“With things settled on the Dark Continent for the time being, we need to look to the north: the Lawful Continent,” Takuto announced, his thoughts turning to their next big problem.

Since Mynoghra didn't officially settle things with Lenea, they were still technically at war with the holy nations. The Divine Nation of Lenea was a separate nation from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia, but that didn't mean Qualia would ignore what happened to their former citizens, and Lenea's territory was still up for grabs.

Phon'kaven might've been holding the line, but Mynoghra needed to establish some concrete countermeasures and fast. Beyond the issues with Qualia and Lenea, there was also the Succubus-controlled El-Nah Alliance of Elementals to contend with. The northern continent was rife with problems compared to the south. Mynoghra couldn't take it easy any time soon.

Understanding what Takuto wanted from his remark, Elder Moltar promptly divulged the information he sought. “Unlike the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals, whose status is as good as anyone's guess, we have been collecting information on both Lenea and Qualia, which we hope will be useful to you, my king.”

“Good. I know we dealt a devastating blow to the Divine Nation of Lenea's capital. I assume Qualia is attempting to salvage and rebuild it?”

“The situation is exactly as you have wisely predicted, my king,” Elder Moltar responded. “Among the Saints who still belong to Qualia, the one known as the Scribe Saint has been dispatched to Lenea and is running about attempting to counteract the Plague and Stupor wrought by the Elfuur Sisters.”

“They sent a Saint, huh?”

The king closed his eyes and fell deep into thought. His subordinates watched and waited for him to finish in silence.

Takuto drew on his memories, thinking back to the time he had infiltrated Lenea as High Paladin Verdel. During that time, he had obtained some information on the Scribe Saint. He still didn't know what her ability was, but he got the impression she didn't like conflict very much when he spoke with her in

person. Rather than planning an invasion into Mynoghra or the Dark Continent, Takuto concluded that her goal was to deal with the aftermath in Lenea.

Now that he was thinking about her, he remembered that the Scribe Saint had mentioned the last remaining Qualia Saint—the Mystic Saint—was endeavoring to aid the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals. He wasn't counting on the Holy Kingdom of Qualia to pull it off, but he believed with a Saint on their tail, the Succubi who destroyed El-Nah would be less likely to turn their attention toward Mynoghra.

“Ultimately, it looks like we’ve got a little extra time on our side,” Takuto concluded.

At this stage, it was extremely unlikely that hostile forces would exert any influence on Mynoghra. In which case, his first objective was to use this boon of extra time to develop Mynoghra into a more powerful nation. The state of the empire directly translated into Takuto's own power after all.

“There’s a lot we can do with this time. Let’s get it done being more careful than ever before.”

The meeting's primary agenda was over with those words.

There weren't any serious problems. It was a meeting like any other. Sure, there were a handful of threats, but Takuto would use his wisdom to command the Armies of Ruin to crush them all.

Without letting his guard down, without being arrogant, the mind topping the *Eternal Nations*' leaderboard continued his march to conquer the world.

Or at least...he should have been.

“Okay!” Takuto clapped his hands together. **“Why don’t we talk about Vittorio?”**

You could almost hear the room freeze over with that announcement.

“Domestic Affairs. Diplomacy. Hostile nations. The truth of this world. There are countless problems that need to be dealt with. But the one we need to deal with more than all the rest is Vittorio. Anyone can speak up. I want information, no matter how trivial.”

Takuto's expression was deadly serious. He exuded a clearly displeased aura. His favorite Domestic Affairs hour was over, replaced by the need to face the music. It was time to talk about Mynoghra's notoriously horrible Hero...

Everyone exchanged looks. A beat of silence passed. And then...

“PLEASE HEAR ME OUT, YOUR MAJESTY!!!!”

Appeals came from every corner of the room as if a dam had burst and all hell had been set loose. Their hysterical voices transformed their appeals into venting rather than reporting.

While listening to every word they said, Takuto contemplated how to deal

with Vittorio, cold sweat trickling down his back.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The following Facilities have been Constructed:

> Accursed lands

【Sumptuous Meat Forest】 【Grotesque Zoo】

【Mynoghra Palace: Lv.2】

> Dragontan

【Training Grounds】 【Magic Research Institute】

【Market】 【Clinic】

【Workshop】 【Circus Tent】

【Sumptuous Meat Forest】 【Grotesque Zoo】

The following Research has been completed:

Researched: Six Major Elements

The next Research item has been selected.

Researching: Medical Science

The following units have been produced:

Long-legged Bug x30

Headhunting Bug x10

Brain Eater x22

Giant Pitcher Plant x30

Spirit of Ruin x4

Botchling x2

OK

Takuto spent more time comforting the Dark Elves than listening to their reports. Fortunately, the intensity of their anger and frustration paid off with them vividly remembering the details and saving Takuto the time of having to confirm the situation himself.

Takuto replayed Vittorio's actions in his mind and tried to guess his intentions. Vittorio had gone with a crackpot strategy that completely differed from what Takuto had initially thought he was going with. Only Takuto could infer what his true motive was.

“The Cult of Ira, eh? I have to wonder why he chose not to give it an official name, but I can kind of see what he's trying to do with it.”

After verifying Vittorio's actions—including the parts he didn't get any reports on—Takuto cracked an amused smile and said the one thing everyone wanted to hear. He was about to make clear the actions of the man who had harassed Atou and all the residents of Mynoghra to this day. In other words, he was about to reveal the strategy Mynoghra was currently implementing under Vittorio. This also meant they would have the answer to what caused Takuto's amnesia and its cure. In fact, this was the part Takuto's subordinates were most curious about.

“Does it have something to do with why you regained consciousness, King Takuto?” Atou asked. “Honestly, that jester's actions were all so outrageous that I couldn't even begin to guess at what his intentions were...”

“Well, it's not completely unrelated to my recovery, I suppose. But I don't have any proof, so I won't know until I ask him,” Takuto said evasively.

Was he beating around the bush because he honestly didn't have concrete proof?

Atou and the Dark Elves wanted to know the finer details in case Takuto suffered the same fate again, but he wouldn't grant them that wish. Atou, and Atou alone, picked up on what was unsaid because she studied Takuto on a daily basis. He was hiding something. What that something was and why he would hide it was a mystery to her. But there were some things she did understand.

Is King Takuto concerned about what Vittorio is up to? Atou wondered. There are a lot of incongruities with how the Cult of Ira was established. Does this have something to do with why King Takuto isn't showing himself publicly? Perhaps Vittorio's goals don't completely align with King Takuto's.

The Gleeful Spin Doctor was a master schemer, and his lord and master, Takuto, was a cut above him. Those were heights Atou could never reach; she could only look up and watch the battle of wits unfold at the top. The battle to predict the other player's hand had already begun.

“So the question is: what is motivating Vittorio to take his current actions? We need more information to understand that. For that... Oh, I know, are there any sacred texts?”

“Er...sacred texts?” Atou parroted, stupefied by the abrupt shift in topic.

Takuto took her reaction to mean she didn’t understand his question, so he hummed **“Um...”** and glanced up at the ceiling in thought. **“Like, are there any holy scriptures? Er, I guess it’s an evil cult, so unholy scriptures? Call it whatever you like, anything written for and by the cult is what I want. If there’s anything like that, can you bring it to me?”**

Atou looked around the room to see if anyone had obtained such writings. But the others were glancing about in a similar manner, so it appeared no one had. Considering how much they despised Vittorio, it was impossible to expect them to keep an eye on his every move. And now, after regaining their wits about them with the king’s return, they had to wonder if even that was a part of Vittorio’s evil plans.

But why was Takuto after scripture? His council had already gathered a relatively large amount of information on the Cult of Ira’s doctrines without needing to delve deeper. Their doctrine was rather simple: devote everything to praising and worshiping the Great God Takuto Ira. That’s it.

To break it down in even simpler terms, their doctrine was: “Takuto Ira is awesome! Cooler than cool! Stronger than strong! Unrivalled! The best in the world!” Even a child could understand that—and it was precisely because their doctrine was made with children in mind that it spread at astonishing speeds.

There shouldn’t have been a point in writing such things down and bundling it as scripture. Why would Takuto want to read it, anyway? Atou glanced at Takuto, asking him as much with her eyes.

“I’m curious,” Takuto chuckled in response, seeming truly intrigued and amused. **“I’d like to read it as soon as possible,”** he added lightly, making it clear there was more to having scripture than met the eye.

The King of Ruin made his move without ever leaving his throne.



Sumptuous Meat Forest

Building

Population +10%

City Happiness +10%

Food Consumption +20%

Description

~Binge drinking and eating all day long.~

Sumptuous Meat Forest is a building unique to Mynoghra.

It grants a bonus to Happiness and Population at the cost of increasing Food consumption. The Flesh Tree must be built first.



Workshop

Building

City Building Productivity +20%

Description

~ The amount of iron determines the fate of a nation.~

Workshops increase the Productivity of a city.

Required to produce certain weapons and buildings.

Chapter 6: Dream

AROUND the same time Takuto had regained consciousness and was putting his talent to use directing Mynoghra, the Cult of Ira steadily expanded its reach from Dragontan. They were currently focusing their energy on building their headquarters.

The followers of Ira had purchased a large mansion once home to a wealthy man in the town's business district. They had remodeled the building and were using it as their meetinghouse. Although only a few short days had passed since the cult's founding, they were beginning to take shape as an organization.

"Heeeeey, Archlector Idiot. You here?" a girl called out with a lack of respect and courtesy as she entered a simple room within the meetinghouse that was a repurposed servant's quarters. She was one of the rare few Goatmen living in Dragontan. Her human traits were dominant, so the only way to identify her as a Goatman was by her horns and ears.

She looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years old. Her ferocious Goatman-distinct eyes and brusque attitude drew immediate attention when she entered the room. If she only kept her mouth shut, no man would be able to leave the exquisitely dressed young lady with stunning horns alone.

The girl's name was Yona'Yona. She held the rank of Lector within the Cult of Ira and was the second in charge.

Deep in thought inside the sparse room with nothing besides a chair, Vittorio responded blasély, "Mnnn? Uh-huh, I'm heeere."

As for what the Spin Doctor had been up to lately, there was surprisingly nothing of note. Once he'd finished establishing the cult's foundation, he left all the proselytizing and routine duties to the followers and spent the rest of his days holed up in his room. He was the founder and Archlector of the Cult of Ira whether he liked it or not. As someone who should be going out and preaching the evil word to his followers, Vittorio's current actions—or rather, inaction—were problematic to say the least.

But the Cult of Ira was a religion with an easy-to-understand doctrine. The cult ran relatively smoothly, with each member holding meetings to praise Takuto's accomplishments. Of course, various issues and problems always arise when people gather together. Whenever they came across a problem only

Vittorio could solve, they naturally came to him about it.

“...Sooo? What kinda business do you have with moi, a man who’s so damn busy he can’t even get some shuteye in peace?” Vittorio asked, annoyed. “My time is limited, little Yona’Yona.”

“Says you. You’re all talk. Don’t act all important when you haven’t done squat, you old cod. Want me to knock some sense into you?”

“Oh my, look who’s craaanky!”

Everything about Vittorio was inflammatory, but getting into a war of words with him was a waste of breath. He had his trademark sneer pasted on his ugly face and was yet again acting in a way that was hard to figure out.

Yona’Yona was thoroughly burned out from being forced into the role of Lector and buried under all of the supposed “Archlector’s” work. She thought she’d already experienced all the world’s hardships as an orphaned street urchin, but she quickly learned that brainy work was its own kind of torture. Even more so when her boss wouldn’t do a lick of work and pushed all the annoying things onto her.

Her irritation and indignation were only further enflamed by the fact most of the annoying things pushed her way included her boss’s own hairbrained antics.

She let out a long-suffering sigh. *And who was it that told me a little bit of happiness escapes every time you sigh?* She wondered as she glared daggers at Vittorio, resigned to the misery that was about to come.

“Ooooh! What a piercing gaze, ma poulette! Going to scare me shitless! By the waaaaay! You must have a reason for coming all the way out to moi’s room. What in the realm of all that is evil brings you heeere?”

Few ever ventured to Vittorio’s room. The Cult of Ira had already taken flight from his nest and began doing its own thing. Only a handful of crazy people still had any interest in a man who’d neglected his Archlector duties to indulge in flights of fancy and scheming. Which was why Vittorio asked what her business was with him.

“We just got a writ from the capital. Asking us to cough up taxes to the man. How do we play it?” Yona’Yona pulled a single-page letter from her pocket. Looking closely, Vittorio could see that the purple wax was sealed with the national emblem, indicating that the missive carried a certain formality.

Until now, all important matters within Mynoghra were generally communicated directly from Takuto to his subordinates using telepathy. But that wasn’t possible with him incapacitated. This was likely why the empire-management council took a more extreme approach to getting their demands across.

Letters sealed with the national emblem held significance. They shouldn't be treated carelessly, but Yona'Yona just tossed it at Vittorio.

"How crass!" he whimpered. "Sheesh, I wish I could see the face of the person who raised you— Oops! I forgot, your parents abandoned you! My bad —"

Yona'Yona used her Beastman agility to appear right in front of Vittorio, exhaled, and drove her fist into his stomach as hard as she could.

"AUGH! I'm anti-violence!"

Not designed for fighting, Vittorio took that blow to the gut and fell right off his chair, letting out an obnoxious yelp as he went. He got what he deserved. Besides, even if he went to complain a teenager was beating him up, almost everyone within Mynoghra would rejoice.

Even the offender ignored his protest and continued to tell him about her business.

"You don't have to take a jab at somebody every time ya breathe," she quipped. "Quit yer yapping and start reading, clown. I don't give a jot about what happens to you when you go to the capital. Just don't inconvenience me and the followers of Ira, you got it?"

"Mm-mm-mmmm! Your faith is *très bien*! Buuuut, you know, you seriously lack love for moi! Show me a little more love! *L'amour*! More kindness! *Gentil*!" Though he trembled from the pain radiating from his stomach, Vittorio gave her a thumbs-up with a Cheshire grin.

This faith of hers led Vittorio to appoint Yona'Yona as Lector and his second in charge. The more faithful they are, the more useful they are. Useful not only to Vittorio, but even more so to *Takuto Ira*.

People with strong faith have a stronger ability to resist greed and temptation. Because they strongly rely on and cling to their faith, they don't allow any interference from others and simply pursue the teachings of their religion. Not even Vittorio—the founder—was the exception to this rule. He spared no thoughts toward power or influence—nothing but God filled his thoughts.

Everything was solely for *Takuto Ira*.

This was exactly the kind of perfect follower he sought—one worthy of offering prayer to their Great God.

"You really are good at what you do, little Yona'Yona, but I really can't approve of your violent tendencies," Vittorio nagged. "Can you actually serve as Ira's Lector like that?"

"Don't worry. It might not look that way to you, but I've rarely been violent my whole life. Be kind to friends of Mynoghra and the followers of Ira—

I'm certain God would tell me that!"

"Um, what does that make moi? Chop suey? I'm a friend of Mynoghra, aren't I? Aren't I?"

"Enough yappin', more reading!"

Vittorio began reading the letter while exchanging casual jabs with Yona'Yona.

His schemes were going so perfectly according to plan it was scary. Yona'Yona was the ideal Lector and the best person to be the face of the Cult of Ira. The Catkin mother and daughter were also an excellent find. They were still in the early stages of their faith, but they were strong believers who didn't know how to doubt anything. Other talented people were also gathering to support the Cult of Ira.

The number of believers steadily increased, and they were already extending their reach into Phon'kaven through trade and other means.

The number of fanatics multiplied and their prayers gathered around God. The Cult of Ira's—Vittorio's—goal was nearly complete.



THE eccentric trickster was dreaming alone in his room. The desire that drove him the moment since he came to this world continued to involve everything in its path as it pressed forward.

Every *Eternal Nations*' player has tried to control Vittorio, and no one has succeeded but one. His genius can't be fettered. He devours information greedily and spits out plans like a raging river, believing that his brain for schemes surpassing human comprehension was created just for this moment.

"Mwahahaha~!"

Everything was perfect, everything was complete.

After coming this far, no one could stop his plan, none could oppose it. Vittorio couldn't wait to see how Takuto would react when he understood the scheme Vittorio had whipped up for him.

He was dying to see how he would evaluate his dream.

"Dream, dream, dream~."

The eccentric trickster tricks all. What is it he desires—what dream is he trying to have come true by tricking even the master he ardently adores?

"The stupider the dream, the more maddeningly you want it to come true. Don't you agree, my god?"

But at the end of all his prayers, his dream finally came true.

Everything was for the Great Player, Takuto Ira.

“The day of celebration is nearly heeeeeeeeeere! My
Gooooooooooooooooooooood!!”

Vittorio dreamed a pleasant dream, his laughter unending.



Circus Tent

Building

City Happiness +5%

City Cultural Power +5%

City Mana Production +5%

The Circus Tent is where street performers can put on shows.

It increases a City's Cultural Power and generates a small amount of income depending on the size of the city.

Evil empires occasionally display prisoners of war, which negatively impacts their reputation with good empires.



Grotesque Zoo

Building

City Happiness +10%

City Cultural Power +20%

City Mana Production +10%

✂ Unlocks Botchling

Grotesque Zoo is a building unique to Mynoghra.

Grotesque creatures that can hardly be called animals and can't be found in nature are put on display here. This building increases a city's Happiness and generates income based on the city's size.

It also unlocks the Combat Unit: Botchling.

It's a building that has a lot to offer, but at an exorbitant construction cost.

Chapter 7: Journal

<The Divine City Amrita, Capital of the Former Divine Nation of Lenea>

THE site of the desolated old cathedral had been transformed into a temporary command center for the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. Some of the aid the ground team had requested from Qualia had arrived. Tents were set up in the vacant lot where the rubble had been cleared away and various supplies, such as rations, medical equipment, and medicine, stood in stacks.

This was the very site where the King of Ruin had manifested and wielded his evil to wipe out an entire nation and its Saints. Many opposed setting up the command center in such a desecrated space. That was why it was crucial for Qualia to set up their base of operations there: to watch out for a resurgence of evil, comfort the suffering masses, and rebuild the city.

All of that sounded excellent on paper, but it meant confining Qualia's strongest weapon, the Scribe Saint, to her duties in the Southern Province.

"Inquisitor Imlerith, here are the reports on the land readjustment project, emergency ration distribution, and the current status of treating the epidemic."

"Thank you. Please give me a brief overview of each."

Seated at a desk in the center of the command tent, Inquisitor Krähe Imlerith oversaw Amrita's reconstruction while receiving reports from the Paladins.

Inquisitors hold a unique role within Qualia and have a wide range of skills and knowledge to serve in that role. They have the authority and skill to lead armies during emergencies, negotiate with foreign nations, and rebuild cities during a disaster if necessary. So it wasn't out of the question for Krähe to lead the Paladins and their special unit to rebuild this addled region on behalf of the Scribe Saint.

The problem was that they were lacking in every department. The Scribe Saint and Inquisitor were only dispatched to investigate this region. Of course, they had been accompanied by Paladins, provincial soldiers, and various clergy to serve as logistical support, but they weren't prepared to engage in such large-scale activities as attempting to rebuild an entire capital city. Not to mention attempting to do damage control as the issues spread throughout the Southern Province.

Just because the city where they had built their command center was the most heavily damaged didn't mean they should ignore the rest. Not only were there small villages throughout the province, but also several large towns. And Krähe simply didn't have enough authority to extend her reach to all of the Southern Province. As much as it pained her to admit it, while every measure she'd taken to help had been effective, it was but a drop in the bucket at this point.

"That's it for the reports," the Paladin said. "Regarding the epidemic permeating the city, fortunately, many people have recovered on their own because it's like a common cold. However, it's highly contagious and has spread rapidly throughout the Southern Province, so we can't be optimistic. I've spoken with my squadmates and we believe we need to be prepared for the long haul."

"That's bad news," Krähe replied. "The ironclad rule for cases like this is to quarantine the infected, but that's impossible at this scale of infection and lack of medical personnel. It's frustrating, but I think our only choice is to focus on treating the sickest first."

The young Paladin giving the report nodded, equally vexed by their predicament.

They could have prevented this—they just didn't have the supplies or manpower to make it happen. Their frustration over things not going as they hoped was evident in their bitter expressions.

They lacked support. From the outside, it may have looked like Qualia didn't care, but the central government wasn't sitting back and doing nothing.

The El-Nah Alliance of Elementals had been defeated. One of the two largest holy nations on the continent was supposedly conquered. If the nation ruled by the Elves had truly fallen, then war was on the horizon. And now that the King of Ruin was confirmed in the act of destroying a good nation, Qualia had an urgent need to reorganize their forces, and that was where they focused all their energy.

Central was busy retraining Paladins and forming new armies. After all, Qualia hadn't experienced war for years now. Since the Mystic Saint never left Central, it was about as much of a sign of good faith as any that they had dispatched their only other Saint to the region.

Central should actually be applauded for being gutsy enough to dispatch the Scribe Saint under these circumstances. That didn't make the current situation any better, however.

The curse wrought by the King of Ruin weighed heavily upon the dispatched forces. And his curse reached beyond spreading a plague. It could even be said that his secondary curse was inflicting greater damage upon the

masses.

“The real problem is the people who have forgotten their faith...” Krähe said.

The people living in Amrita had forgotten their faith. For some inexplicable reason, they had forgotten all the teachings of the Holy God Arlos and acted as if they had never believed in Him before. It was easy to see this was a seed of malice planted by the forces of evil.

Just how desolated must those who’ve lost their bastion of faith feel?

Krähe’s team had succeeded in reintroducing Arlos’s holy teachings to the populace. However, unlike with the epidemic, they wouldn’t see results in the short term, so it posed a greater struggle for them.

“To be honest, it’s difficult to do anything about that at the moment. We’ve been scouring St. Amritate Cathedral’s forbidden archives, but there’s no reference to such a thing occurring before, so we’re entirely in the dark,” the Paladin explained.

“That’s bad news. Qualia strictly forbids anything pertaining to the dark arts,” Krähe said. “The possession of books or notes on such topics are forbidden even for research purposes. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you likely won’t find any information on it.”

“Would any of the Inquisitors know anything about it?” the Paladin asked.

“Only the divine are permitted to deal with the dark arts,” she cautioned. “Attempting to understand and unravel the dark arts is folly.”

“Forgive my faux pas.”

Asking such a question could be considered heresy, but Krähe didn’t care to reprimand him. Inquisitors weren’t there to pounce on and punish believers who had a slip of the tongue. Besides, Krähe needed all the help she could get. She could discern what actually merited punishment, and being an Inquisitor required more tolerance than most other positions. She appreciated having someone who voiced their opinions like him, even if it stemmed from the carelessness of youth.

“People are losing their memories and only those that pertain to their faith. What kind of evil is this?” Krähe lamented. “My heart breaks to see people who don’t even know how to grieve anymore.”

Spreading plague and forgetfulness. These were the two curses wrought by the King of Ruin. Although they were completely different in nature, Krähe surmised that together they were extremely effective in plunging the Southern Province into chaos.

They could have easily handled just one. If it was only the plague, then they could have mobilized all the clergy in the Southern Province to focus on

treating the infected. If it was only the forgetfulness, then they could have indoctrinated each town and city after they regained control.

But they were facing both. It was precisely because both were occurring at the same time that their actions were restricted, as if their feet were caught in quicksand.

They didn't know why the King of Ruin had unleashed these curses upon this land. But seeing as he hadn't inflicted all-out destruction or massacre, he evidently had some dark, hidden motives.

"I'll speak with the victims again later," Krähe said. "We might have overlooked something."

Krähe had attempted to interview those who'd forgotten their faith countless times. She hadn't obtained much out of it after the first few times, but that was no reason to stop. With tenacious patience, she indicated her intention to continue the investigation.

"Very well. I'll make the arrangements right away. May God's blessings be upon you."

"Thank you. May God's blessings be upon you as well..."

The young Paladin executed a military salute and withdrew from the room.

Krähe exhaled a small sigh as she watched him depart. *What awaits us in the future?* She let her eyes slide shut and spent a good while after that entreating Arlos for mercy.



"IF I'm not mistaken...you're Cleric Cayman?"

It took Krähe a few seconds to remember the name of the man brought before her. If memory served her well, he was the Cleric in charge of a parish somewhere in the capital. She recalled he was a devout believer and a skilled Cleric. However, Cleric Cayman's apathetic reaction stood in stark contrast to the man she remembered.

"Uhh... And I believe you are... Inquisitor Imlerith?" he ventured, sounding unsure.

"...I am. I spoke with you on several occasions during the Paladin Murder Case that occurred in this city," she said.

"Is that right? No, I suppose you are right. But...I just don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

"You seem to be feeling under the weather. That's not good. Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable," she suggested.

Krähe was acquainted with Cleric Cayman. As she said herself, she had requested his assistance on several occasions during the Paladin Murder Case. It wasn't an easy investigation, so she'd spent a significant amount of time on her mission and felt that she had built a decent rapport with Cleric Cayman.

When she looked at him now, however, he wasn't even a shadow of the man he had been when they last parted. Cleric Cayman was one of the most pious believers Krähe ever had the honor of meeting. Losing the faith that made him who he was had plunged him into tremendous confusion. It would be a bit of a stretch to call him a good friend, but Krähe couldn't bear to see a friend paralyzed with fear.

"Pardon me... For what reason was I brought here?" he asked hesitantly. "To be frank, there isn't much I can tell you..."

"I understand," Krähe said. "I simply want to speak with you. You needn't worry. This is simply a venue to ask questions. We won't inconvenience you in any way."

Those words seemed to do the trick. Cleric Cayman's tense expression softened a degree.

Still...what in Arlos's realm are we up against? Krähe wondered. *I've heard the stories, but is it normal for a person to change so dramatically without their faith? I had hoped to question him more thoroughly, but I doubt I'll get the answers I seek.*

As Krähe debated how to best proceed with her questioning, light streamed into the tent from the tent door she'd had closed.

"Um, Miss Krähe..."

A girl appeared in the doorway. Krähe glanced at Cleric Cayman to confirm he still seemed bewildered as she called out to the Scribe Saint.

"What's the matter, Saint Nerim? Did you finish writing in your journal?"

"Y-Yes! I finished writing everything for this morning," Lytrain replied.

"That's good," Krähe responded in the gentlest voice she could muster.

"Th-Thank you!"

Scribe Saint Lytrain Nerim Quartz made it her daily duty to write down the events of the day in a journal that was comically too big for her. It was considered a sacred act, endorsed by the Three Popes and the Mystic Saint. None were allowed to disturb her.

What she recorded were her own memories. Entries included everything from the words of gratitude she'd received from the masses, details about important people she'd met in the past, and memories about those who'd departed. She wrote down those memories, every conversation, word for word, without mistake. And this was how she'd come to earn the name the Scribe

Saint. The large journal she carried everywhere with her made her who she was.

Hugging her precious journal to her chest, Lytrain quietly looked up at Krähe. “Um, Miss Krähe,” she began. “I heard. Things are difficult because everyone has forgotten their faith.”

Hearing her reason for being there, Krähe attempted to have Cleric Cayman leave them. Saints held absolute authority within the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. None could oppose them. None could stop them. Fortunately, Krähe was at an impasse with Cleric Cayman. She thought this was the perfect opportunity to hear what the Saint had to say first. However...

“Ah!” Lytrain spoke up. “You can...stay. Um, if you don’t mind, please stay.”

Lytrain herself had stopped Cleric Cayman from leaving. Was this a matter she didn’t mind others overhearing? Did she simply feel more comfortable having someone else in the room? Or was she driven by an altogether different reason?

Krähe had her misgivings, but she spoke after a moment of contemplation. “In that case, let us return to the topic at hand. As you said, Saint Nerim, the people have lost their memories, and we are at an impasse over how to handle it. Cleric Cayman here has experienced the same affliction, and it seems unlikely that he will be able to return to his Cleric duties.”

Dragged into their conversation, Cleric Cayman gave an awkward nod.

All the skills and spells used by Qualia’s clergy relied on their faith in Arlos. It was a type of magic that belonged to the Miracle Arte category and became unusable without faith. Naturally, Cleric Cayman still had access to the skills and knowledge that didn’t rely on faith-based Miracle Artes. But it was wishful thinking to expect selfless service from a man without faith.

When the King of Ruin had manifested in this land, most of the casualties were limited to combatants—namely, the Paladins. Not only had the Clerics and ordinary clergy not participated in that battle, but it had ended before they knew what was happening. However, it was hard to say they were unaffected when most of these important clergy had lost their faith.

Qualia had qualified personnel in the Southern Province but couldn’t count on them. As someone who knew all too well how nonbelievers behaved during disasters, Krähe felt like her hands were tied.

“Um...that means we can save this city if everyone’s faith returns...right?”

Out of the blue, the young Saint brought up the silliest suggestion.

“Well...in theory, yes,” Krähe replied, her eyes swimming. “But we’ve yet to discover a way to return their faith. The only saving grace is that reteaching them about Arlos is possible. It will take time, but I believe they will believe

once more. At least, that is my humble opinion.”

Did Krähe hastily explain the situation out of panic? Or was it because she knew exactly what the Scribe Saint intended to say next? Krähe wished her prediction turned out to be wrong, but things played out exactly as she’d feared.

“I-I’ll cure them,” Lytrain offered. “I-I know that I can do it with the power of my j-journal.”

“That’s not a good idea. Your Miracle Arte—”

“Miss Krähe,” Lytrain cut Krähe off, her voice determined.

Krähe knew all too well that she—that no one could stop Lytrain. There was no way to stop her, nor was such an act allowed.

“Wh-What is it, Saint Nerim?”

Amber eyes fastened on Krähe. What did she glimpse in those clear, shimmery depths? Whatever it was, Krähe froze under the pressure.

“This is the city where I lived with my father,” Lytrain said.

“Y-Yes, I’m aware of that, Saint Nerim. If you go down the main road just outside our headquarters and turn the corner, you’ll come to the house where you lived with your father,” Krähe replied with ease, not even needing to dredge up any memories to recall it.

For it was Lytrain who had once shown her the way to her family home. Lytrain had already been forcefully removed from her father by then, so she couldn’t invite Krähe over nor return home herself. But the location and its appearance were vividly etched into Krähe’s memory.

“Yes, I’m sure of it...probably...”

Lytrain, flipping through the pages of her journal to confirm, seemed to find the entry she was looking for and gave a small nod as she spoke. She had likely checked for the location of her house in the journal. Krähe’s brows furrowed as she watched her.

“I’ve been praying for so, so long...” Lytrain closed the journal with a snap and muttered to herself before Krähe could speak. It was a feeble voice, even for a young girl—one that even the slightest noise would drown out. “Father told me: ‘If you keep doing good deeds, good things will happen.’ Father never lies.”

“Yes, High Paladin Verdel is an incredibly virtuous man,” Krähe responded. “He’s the type to put his words into action.”

“I...I’ve been a very good girl all this time. I’ve done all...the good deeds I could,” Lytrain continued her quiet monologue.

The Scribe Saint was driven by her feelings for her father. He was the only family she’d obtained since being born into this world. The bond between father and daughter was real regardless of blood relations, and that was what made her

yearn to be with him all the more.

What baby bird that has yet to leave the nest doesn't cry out for its parents? Lytrain's wish was nothing unusual. But nothing mattered more to her.

"He's very busy, so I'm sure I can't see him right now. But I just know I can after his mission is over..." Lytrain had spoken so passionately, she needed to take a deep breath.

Lytrain's father—High Paladin Verdel—had been tasked with exploring the Accursed Lands and made first contact with Mynoghra. All contact had since been lost with the proud High Paladin, and his survival seemed hopeless.

"It's my dream. To live with my father again..." Lytrain confessed, a bashful smile gracing her young features. She could smile about it because she'd recently reunited with her father.

God exists.

That wasn't a lie or wishful thinking. God's existence had been confirmed. That was why the religious nations of this world had taken such strong roots in people's hearts and continued to prosper for so long. It was no exaggeration to say that God's existence supported the people who lived in this country.

And so Lytrain continued to pray.

She was certain that God was watching her good deeds. The trials he put her through were painful and weighed heavily upon her small shoulders, but at the end of all her suffering and self-sacrifice awaited her dreams being granted.

And that was why Lytrain's—why the wish of a young, frail girl was the strongest of all.

"So...please...let me do my best," Lytrain pleaded.

Krähe could only nod in response. But agreeing was the cruelest thing she could do to the girl. After all, in exchange for the Scribe Saint—for Lytrain—using her Miracle Arte...

...Arlos demanded her memories.

"God, I have a request. I offer you my memories in return. Please return this man's faith to him."

A gentle light enveloped Lytrain as she spoke. The young girl's prayer emitted a pure light that was so bright and powerful it threatened to consume her.

A Saint's Miracle. Krähe could not stop it.

Saints performed Miracles to save the suffering. No one—not one—was allowed to stop this sacred act. There was no greater evil than attempting to stop a Saint determined to perform a Miracle. Inquisitors were called to protect God's

law. As one granted such an honorable role, Krähe used her faith in God to suppress the emotions screaming at her to put a stop to this cruelty.

The light slowly faded...

Before long, it was all over—in exchange for one man regaining his faith, one girl's memories of something dear to her were lost forever.

Cleric Cayman wept and expressed his gratitude and penitence to Saint Lytrain. Then he left at once to return to his duties, leaving Krähe and Lytrain alone in the tent.

"Are you all right with your decision?" Krähe gently asked Lytrain, who was desperately scouring the pages of her journal since using her Miracle Arte.

"Yes... Er, I-I think...?" Lytrain stammered.

"I see."

Krähe said no more.

Scribe Saint Lytrain's memories were a finite resource. It was possible to prevent the loss of important memories by actively sacrificing the new memories made every day, but if she continued to excessively use her Miracle Artes, she would eventually run out of memories to sacrifice. In other words, there would come a day when she would be forced to sacrifice the memories she'd been shielding.

There was only one important thing she'd refused to offer after sacrificing so many memories she was a shell of herself—the memories of her father.

Krähe was implying that if she continued to perform Miracles recklessly, there would come a time when she would have to make an irrevocable decision. That would be the day when Lytrain would lose all her memories and stop being Lytrain. That would be the day when she lost all the memories of her father, and an empty doll that could function as a Saint would be born.

The world was brimming with chaos right now.

Evil forces were eagerly threatening people's lives and moving toward dragging all life into the depths of hell. The El-Nah Alliance of Elementals had been defeated, proving evil was already on the move. Qualia had also received a critical blow when the Southern Province broke off to form the Divine Nation of Lenea and they'd yet to recover from it. And to make matters worse, an oracle had been given to a neutral nation in the Dark Continent, warning that yet another fearsome being had appeared.

The battle between light and dark would surely—no, undoubtedly—intensify in the coming days. A countless number of people would become wounded and collapse in the process. The number of people seeking the Saints' aid would only increase. And Lytrain had too much heart to abandon the innocent people who sought her help.

Scribe Saint Lytrain would continue to use her Miracle Artes. Even if it meant giving away all the memories she could give...

When that happened...what in the realm could this precious, kind child have left to offer?

"Um, Inquisitor Imlerith?" Lytrain called with nervous diffidence, breaking Krähe out of the dark thoughts surrounding a question with no good answers.

"...What is it?"

"Did God...did Arlos see me perform a good deed?"

It killed Krähe to see her like this. She felt like her heart was being ripped out and stomped on. It was unbearable. So she slammed the door to her heart shut, froze her emotions, and formed a smile to hide her thoughts. But all the ironclad willpower in the world did nothing to stop her voice from quivering.

"Y-Yes," she stammered. "God is surely...watching over your deeds, Nerim."

"I see... I'm glad." Lytrain smiled as though she'd been granted the ultimate relief. Her smile was so innocent, Krähe felt like she'd sinned.

Krähe remembered. She remembered how this little girl actually had a cheerful and outgoing personality. Remembered how she'd taken on this timid, searching personality to try and prevent any unpleasantness for the people who knew her, but she'd forgotten.

Krähe remembered. She remembered how the name Lytrain had been given to the girl when Central had taken custody of her, and that her real name—Nerim—was the one given by her adoptive father. Remembered how when they'd met for the very first time, and Krähe was nervous about being in the presence of a Saint, Nerim had kindly said, "Please call me Nerim like a friend!"

Krähe remembered. She remembered how Nerim had a stronger sense of justice than most and was more sensitive to people's suffering than anyone else. How she was just like her father and believed that she'd one day become a fine Paladin like him—how that should've been her fate.

Krähe remembered. She remembered how the girl secretly wept in the dead of night, crying out her father's name...

"Your father will definitely return. And..."

Krähe was crying on the inside. The smile she'd practiced a million times crumbled, giving way to a sorrowful mess.

Oh my Lord! Oh my great and merciful God! Why do you desire such a tragedy? Why do you desire her misery? When will you save her? How will you save her? What should I do for this dear child?

No God answered Krähe's prayers.

If God is omniscient and omnipotent, he must be able to hear me.

God, whose existence had been confirmed, remained silent per His holy will.

And so Krähe was left with no option but to maintain her sad smile...

“Please call me Krähe like a friend.”

She vowed to stay with this fragile little girl until the end that would someday come.



<Former Qualia Southern Province, Trade City of Seldoch>

ONE day, about a month after the collapse of the Divine Nation of Lenea, in the city closest to the border between the Southern Province and the Dark Continent.

The Trade City of Seldoch, located at the southernmost edge of Qualia’s territory, had a history of thriving off unofficial trade with the neutral nations on the Dark Continent. But a gloomy atmosphere enveloped the city during this era of turmoil. The immigration office at the city gates had been closed, and now stillness reigned in the space that had once brimmed with activity.

Qualia’s Three Popes had imposed the Provincial Preemption Laws to designate Seldoch as a city under Central’s control. Their first course of action was to halt all traffic. This included not only preventing people from entering, but also not allowing anyone to leave. And during a time of crisis at that.

Most of the merchants had quickly fled to safer locations, and the epidemic made it difficult for travelers and pilgrims to make their rounds anyway. The immigration officers, who usually didn’t have a second to rest while inspecting all the merchants, pilgrims, and mercenaries that came and went on any given day, found themselves forced to take a leave of absence as a result of this policy change. Of course, the gates still needed to be secured, so it wasn’t completely unmanned.

On this particular day, a lone soldier sat in a chair inside the immigration office at the gate, leaning his elbow on the lookout window as he absently gazed out at the clear, blue sky. Anyone who saw him could tell he was bored out of his mind not having any work despite being assigned an important job.

“I hate to say this, but having too much free time is its own kind of torture...” the soldier muttered to himself. “With this little to do, I’m actually starting to miss how hectic things used to be.”

It’s common in any military organization for there to be a large gap in the

sense of crisis felt by soldiers at the bottom ranks and the leaders at the top. While this particular soldier did feel a little anxious, he lacked any sense of impending doom and just idly let the day pass him by, wasting time simply hoping for his shift to end as soon as possible.

And that was when *something* suddenly appeared with no warning.

“Hellooooooooooooo. Can I have a mooooment of your time, good sir?!”

“Whoa! Wh-What the hell?! Er, who are you?”

A strange man appeared outside the window as suddenly as a freak storm on a clear day. The soldier might’ve been zoning out, but he had a clear view of the area outside of the window and there was nowhere to sneak up from. And yet, the man had gotten this close to him without him noticing him at all. Even this soldier, who’d been lazily doing his job, couldn’t hide his alarm.

He jumped away from the window and rested his hand on the sword sheathed at his waist.

But the strange-looking man seemed unconcerned with the soldier’s wariness and threatening pose. He didn’t even attempt to make excuses for his suspicious appearance.

“Ooooooooooh! Pardon my late introductiooon! My name is Vittorio. Vittorio from the direction of Mynoghra!”

He paid no attention to the soldier’s baffled and suspicious gaze and instead executed a flamboyant and theatrical bow. As he slowly raised his head, the soldier couldn’t help feeling like the man was a snake rearing its sickle-shaped neck to strike. And his ear-to-ear grin was about as discomfoting as a wolf licking its chops before chowing down on its prey.

It’s anyone’s guess if the soldier was lucky or unlucky to be so far down the chain of command to have never been informed about the ruin wrought by Mynoghra’s King Takuto Ira. However, it soon became clear that such questions were meaningless at this stage.

People appeared behind the strange man in droves. Where they came from was as much a mystery as the man’s own random appearance. They all wore equally broad and disturbing smiles. They almost seemed artificial and mass-produced, but the soldier could tell from the grumpy and tired faces of the girls at the front of the group that they weren’t dolls.

“Wh-What in Arlos’s good world do you want?” the soldier asked, more than a little freaked out by them. “This city is on lockdown.”

He was the type to act domineering whenever he dealt with people from the Dark Continent, but it seemed like he was smart enough not to do anything unnecessary in this situation. Although that was about as good as his brain was going to do him, because he kept letting his panic at the lack of help being

nearby show through.

Then again, no amount of intelligence on his part was going to get him through an encounter with the Gleeful Spin Doctor in front of him.

“Are you haaaappy right noooooow~?”

The same words he’d said somewhere else were echoed for a second time here.

Vittorio’s eccentric behavior when he had too much free time on his hands was on full display...

The next move played by the ultimate scheming Hero was being put into motion.

Chapter 8: Guards

AROUND a week before Gleeeful Spin Doctor Vittorio extended his reach to Seldoch in Qualia's Southern Province, Takuto received an entreaty posed as counsel from Elder Moltar—his empire's Chancellor.

"We need to bolster your guard detail."

"Hmm, that's true," Takuto nodded in agreement. **"I think I might need bodyguards now more than ever."**

In the battles thus far, small mistakes frequently occurred in various areas. There were too many points to reflect on, including underestimating the enemy, poor insight, and overconfidence in the *Eternal Nations'* system. Takuto was aware of these problems and was making improvements and corrections as needed. However, the most urgent need for improvement was the king's guard detail, which Elder Moltar was pushing for.

Past experience had shown time and time again that hostile forces used abilities comparable to Mynoghra's, and that they could attack using absurd means exceeding all expectations and logic.

Things would be simple if their enemies were only those with logical abilities, like the Barbarians and Qualia's Paladins. But the enemy they faced now...and those they'd face in the future were coming for Mynoghra using abilities that threw all logic to the wind. Takuto's experience from *Eternal Nations* was rapidly becoming obsolete, and the tried and true strategies he once used with absolute confidence were no longer enough.

Given the circumstances, it was only natural that Elder Moltar and the others would become increasingly concerned. Since the king is the nation, it made sense to place a greater emphasis on guarding him. This was especially true with Takuto recuperating and making it known that the majority of his powers were sealed. His subordinates had every reason to madly throw themselves into trying to resolve the issue of his safety.

"With Lady Atou needing to be more proactive in her other duties, it is of absolute necessity to take even stricter measures to protect you, my king. We may be lacking in your eyes, but I swear we will at least serve as your shields this time." Elder Moltar pushed for an immediate response with an unyielding spirit.

While things had improved, Mynoghra was still in a state of crisis. At this

point, even if Takuto fully recovered and regained the same power he had when he destroyed the Divine Nation of Lenea, he'd still be having this conversation.

Mynoghra's enemies were too deadly and shrouded in the unknown. Elder Moltar was pushing for the right thing—his judgment was sound.

“My guard detail is already taken care of,” Takuto said, naturally arriving at the same conclusion.

“Goo-goo, gyaaaaa-gyaaaaa.”

“What was that?!”

The sound of a baby crying came out of nowhere. Actually, it was far too disturbing to describe as a cry—it had a frightening quality that scraped away at your very soul.

Elder Moltar was startled by it, but immediately stood and prepared to protect his king. But before he could completely prepare, his eyes peeled wide open upon seeing the changes occurring around Takuto.

“What the dark Spirits?!” Elder Moltar cursed.

“Ah-ah-ah... Bah-bah.”

Something seeped out of the darkness with those babbling sounds to protect Takuto. Dogs, cats, insects, birds—it was as if someone had haphazardly assembled parts from different creatures to create an amalgamation. It took a certain level of mental fortitude not to just describe the monstrosity as a lump of stitched-together flesh. Disturbingly elongated arms protruded from the body, each of its hands waving about as if they had a mind of their own. What was even more disturbing was that the upper body of a ginormous fetus bulged from the center of the fleshy mass in a way that made your skin crawl.

When the abomination made eye contact with Elder Moltar, it lifted its fetus arms and let out a delighted, “He-he!”

“Meet my bodyguard,” Takuto announced.

“Th-This...*thing*?!”

Elder Moltar instantly realized what he was looking at. He'd heard about the Mabeast that would be produced by the king's recently constructed Grotesque Zoo. He hadn't had the chance to see one himself but had heard the stories about how these creatures had appearances that were further removed from logic than anything before them.

Before Elder Moltar could confirm their identity with Takuto, he felt something blow its warm, sticky breath on the nape of his neck.

What the?! How? When did it get behind me? He panicked.

Another one of the abominations was right behind him.

Elder Moltar shuddered as he heard their eerie babbling laughter in front and behind him. He wasn't shuddering in shock at its appearance. As a fellow

subordinate of Mynoghra, what did *he* have to fear? It never once crossed his mind that these creatures would hurt him.

No, the presence emitted from both sides of him elicited Elder Moltar's surprised reaction.

This pressure... This overwhelming presence! It's almost like... Elder Moltar sensed a level of power on par with a Hero emanating from the deformed creatures.

"I take it you haven't seen a Botchling yet? It's a unit you can produce with the Grotesque Zoo," Takuto proudly introduced his two newest subordinates.

Elder Moltar was rendered speechless by his explanation. He shivered with awe, knowing his king was already three steps ahead.



"BOTCHLINGS have a Strength of 13. This is higher than what most Heroes start with. And as a plus, since they are evil-aligned, they come with various bonuses that make them pretty powerful as bodyguards. As for their looks... Well, they're kind enough to stay hidden most of the time," Takuto explained.

"They are a far cry from what most people would categorize as an animal, after all," Atou agreed.

Sometime later, Takuto introduced the Botchlings as his new guard detail to his whole empire-management council. Elder Moltar wasn't the only one concerned with the king's safety, so it was only right for them to invite the rest of the council members to the grand unveiling. Both Takuto and Atou thought this was necessary to reassure their subordinates and show the king hadn't lost his touch.

Although their biggest motivation was wanting to boast about the new unit's abilities. After all...the amount of Mana consumed by producing this unit was enough to make even Takuto, who had decided on the bold strategy of consuming *Brave Questers'* gold coins in one go, want to escape reality. He was driven by the half-hearted feeling that if he didn't go big, he'd go home. That said, the Botchling's abilities were well worth the hit to Takuto's Mana and mental health.

"Plus, the Botchling produced in Barren Terrain—in Dragontan—also has the Detect skill," Takuto said. **"As the name suggests, it's a powerful skill that lets them detect if an enemy is disguised or stealthed. It can even detect**

the unique disguises used by Heroes, so it'll be an effective deterrent in that regard."

Seeming to know it was being talked about, one of the Botchlings playing with the rattle Takuto gave it let out a short cry of "Bah!" and grinned. The sinister grin would've sent any normal person running in hysterics, but this was Mynoghra—everyone just responded with wry smiles.

"And the Botchlings produced in Forest Terrain possess the Mimic and Surprise Attack skills, which allow them to catch the enemy by surprise by concealing their presence. There's no one better suited to guarding without the enemy knowing they're there," Atou explained.

The Botchling licking the brand-new chairs that had been prepared for the Grand Council Room realized Atou was speaking about it and let out a "He-he!" in response. Several people were saddened by the slobbered state of the new chairs, but they still forced a smile.

"I have also requested that Caria and Maria stay by the king's side as much as possible. With this, we have two Heroic monsters and two Heroic Witches serving as his guards."

"We'll do our bestest!" Caria said.

"Yippee!" Maria said.

The twins and Atou had quarreled over who got to guard—AKA sleep with—Takuto at night, which was when he was most vulnerable, but it was eventually decided that the Botchlings would sleep with him.

"It's no exaggeration to say that this is the best bodyguard detail Mynoghra can provide right now. If the enemy can get past this, then...I honestly don't know what to do," Takuto said teasingly. The council members bowed their heads in agreement.

This was the best setup possible—although it obviously wasn't perfect. Perfect was impossible to obtain as long as they were in the dark about what attacks their future enemies would employ. In which case, it was pointless to ask for more. Calling it "the best setup possible" was the most adequate description for their situation.

Takuto nodded with satisfaction at his subordinates' reaction. With this, one of Mynoghra's problems had been resolved. They still had an ocean of problems and concerns to address. But Takuto and Mynoghra were making steady progress, one step at a time. Progress toward the victory he vowed to achieve.

"Okay, thanks you two," Takuto said to the Botchlings. **"Your presence is a bit much, so would you mind hiding again?"**

"Bah-Bah..."

“Gyah-Gyah!”

While replying with cries that would have driven an ordinary person insane, the two Botchlings moved as instructed. One glided up into the rafters, while the other seemed to dissolve into their surroundings.

Atou sighed as she watched them each hide in their own way. “I know we can’t do anything about it, but their appearance...leaves much to be desired...”

“Yeaaaah, it is what it is...” Takuto agreed.

All of Mynoghra’s units have unique appearances. Designed without compromise to challenge the limits of 3D modeling technology, these units are a hit with fans of B-horror movies and super popular with a subset of players.

But there was nothing more unpleasant than actually having to face these grotesque creatures in reality. In return, their abilities were the real deal. As someone who had seen plenty of Mynoghra’s *delightful* friends, Takuto had become desensitized enough to complain just a little about their unsettling appearances now.

“Phew... Okay, with that out of the way, I plan to keep myself safe with this guard detail. Does this ease your fears some?”

“Yes, sire!” everyone said as one.

The Dark Elves were just as desensitized as Takuto. They had taken the ferocious appearance of those units to mean that they possessed equally ferocious abilities. Elder Moltar and the rest thought that the Botchlings, who were so large they just barely fit within the Grand Council Room and ceaselessly emitted a bone-crushing evil pressure, would be more than enough to protect the king. This removed one of their greatest concerns.

“That said, I’ll be recuperating in the Palace for a while anyway,” Takuto told them. **“I mean, things have got to be royally screwed up for me to go out in the first place.”**

“I-I’m sorry for royally screwing things up...”

Takuto’s words knocked his confidant right off her high horse and into depression. Atou was still plagued with regret over having her allegiance stolen by the TRPG forces, requiring Takuto to get his hands dirty just to get her back. Of course, Takuto didn’t mean to make a dig at her with that comment, so he rushed to correct himself.

“Don’t say that. I’d do anything for you, Atou. C’mon, cheer up. Your presence has been a big help to me. I mean it.”

“Oh, King Takuto...” Atou said dreamily.

“AHM!” Elder Moltar cleared his throat, interrupting their moment. He didn’t want to disturb them, but they were in the middle of a meeting. He was implying that they flirt elsewhere. The others didn’t say anything, but their gazes

said it all—they agreed with Elder Moltar.

Takuto felt everyone had grown to be more assertive. A bit flustered, he broached the next topic of discussion.

“By the way, Maria, Caria,” he said, addressing the twins. **“How are things going with our little strategy?”**

The twins, bored during the rest of the meeting, jumped to attention like they’d been waiting to have their names called.

“I unleashed the Plague with an emphasis on transmissibility, per Your Majesty’s orders,” Caria replied. “Big Sista did her bestest too, but Forgetting the holy religion has been confined solely to the capital.”

“I did my bestest!” Maria chimed in.

“I can see that. Thank you, girls. You pulled it off exactly as I’d hoped,” Takuto praised them.

Even the Elfuur Sisters, who didn’t usually express their opinions, wanted to draw attention to their hard-earned achievements. As far as Takuto was concerned, their hard work and results played a key role in his strategy. He felt he should praise them more.

Takuto had made his request of the twins way back when he’d just defeated the Game Master in the Divine Nation of Lenea. The twins had unleashed Plague and Forget on the city then. And it was none other than Takuto who’d requested they keep those skills active. All in preparation for his next big move.

“But, like we told you before, Cary and Big Sista have to concentrate to keep this power active, so we can’t do much else.”

“What’s next, Your Majesty?” Maria asked.

While Takuto contemplated the best compliments he could give them, the sisters posed a question first. Their innocent question raised doubts in the minds of the adult council members listening to their conversation. They’d thought the meeting had already answered the question of what was next for Mynoghra. In summary, by sowing chaos in Lenea, they effectively restricted what actions the holy nations could take. The turmoil in the Southern Province that bordered the Dark Continent became a shackle for the holy nations to exert their influence on the Dark Continent.

Everyone believed that because Takuto had succeeded in regaining Atou and destroying the Divine Nation of Lenea, he was planning to temporarily retreat to the Dark Continent to rebuild their forces. With their sharp, devilish intuition, only the twins showed they understood Takuto’s plans went further than that.

“Hahaha!” Takuto laughed. **“Seems like you two get it. Truth is, that**

plan's designed to be more than just a way to buy us time. If that was all I wanted, simply destroying the city and the people there would've done the job fine."

"Does that mean you have other plans for that land?!" Atou jumped right into the conversation, voicing the question everyone else had. Her crimson eyes glimmered with awe and respect, proving she was once again floored by his greatness.

A tad overwhelmed by the intensity of her excessively elated gaze, Takuto nodded, acknowledging he had another strategy in place. Although it was still in the planning stages and he hadn't yet decided on the finer details, the actions he'd ordered the twins to take were a stepping stone for his next move.

"You never cease to amaze me, King Takuto!" Atou gushed. "Not only did you obtain the enemy's technology, but you were already planning three moves ahead all the way back then! Your Atou trembles with admiration for your genius!"

"Hear, hear!" Elder Moltar cheered. "The king's wisdom truly knows no bounds. There is no Mynoghra without our king! It takes everything these old bones have just to keep up with the conversation."

"I'm curious what His Majesty has planned," Maria said.

"Me too, Big Sista. I wonder what will happen next."

Everyone's first reaction was delight. Takuto devised ingenious strategies that went beyond human understanding. The next move had already been put into motion, bringing Mynoghra one step closer to world conquest. The king's genius was even more apparent since his recovery, and though he wasn't back to full health yet, he didn't let that slow him down.

They all thought, *Aaah, just how magnificent is Takuto Ira? He is truly the incarnation of the darkness that shrouds the world.*

"However...there's someone aside from me who's caught on to this..."

Takuto's next words doused their excitement with ice water, drowning them in indescribable worry. No one could keep up with the King of Ruin's supernatural intellect and otherworldly planning—well, except for one.

Just as the name of a certain someone crossed every Dark Elf's mind with a foreboding sense of dread...

"Forgive me for interrupting your meeting! There's been an emergency," someone's taut voice rang through the room.

A soldier waited quietly on one knee by the door. He had an urgent message for the council. Some sort of trouble had arisen. The poor messenger's face stiffened under the scrutiny of the people who were like gods to an ordinary man like him. Takuto had made it known that meetings could be interrupted for

important matters when necessary, so the messenger wouldn't get into trouble. The messenger had decided the matter was urgent enough to interrupt them now rather than wait until the meeting ended. That couldn't mean anything good, and a wave of anxiety ran through all but one in the room.

Only Takuto seemed to be enjoying this. Feeling like a kid about to be proven right, he pointed behind the messenger and cheerfully ordered, **“Tell that child.”**

“Yes, sire! ...Uh, um, where might they— Whoa!!”

“Bah-bah...”

The Dark Elf messenger nearly had a heart attack, he was so shocked by the Botchling suddenly appearing behind him. Displeased with his reaction, the Botchling puffed out its cheeks. But it received the messenger's report and soundlessly moved to whisper in Takuto's ear, because he couldn't use Telepathy without commandership.

What in the world was the report about? Takuto let out a truly amused laugh as everyone in the room looked to him for answers.

“I see. He chose now of all times, eh?”

“Your Majesty... What is it?” Elder Moltar asked.

“He came to see me.”

The tension in the room doubled.

Mynoghra's King Takuto Ira and his subordinate, Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio—the time had finally come for them to face each other. What would that conversation bring about? In the face of the oncoming storm, Takuto's subordinates remained silent, unsure of what they could or should say.

“Boy, am I looking forward to it. What unreasonable demands will he have for me?”

Vittorio, the Hero who'd been working behind the scenes in Dragontan all this time, had finally come to see his master. That could only mean that his plan was firmly in place, and he was ready to throw it at Takuto—either as a present or a challenge.

What would the powerful drug known as the Gleeful Spin Doctor bring to Mynoghra? Indifferent to the mental turmoil his subordinates were going through, Takuto merely laughed like he was having the time of his life.



Botchling

Combat Unit

Strength: 13 Move: 2

《Predation》《Flesh Eater》

《Regeneration》《Evil》

※ Unlocked by Grotesque Zoo

※ Skills change based on the Terrain where Botchlings are produced.

Forest: 《Mimic》《First Strike》《Surprise Attack》

Wasteland: 《Stalk》《Chase》《Detect》《Surround》

NO IMAGE

Description

~It is no one,
encompasses all elements of life,
and twists them.~

Botchlings are a Combat Unit unique to Mynoghra.

They possess insanely high Strength and a variety of skills.

In addition, they have the unique trait of acquiring their skills based on the Terrain of the city where they are produced. For that reason, you should consider your strategy when selecting a city to build the Grotesque Zoo.

They cost a small fortune to produce, but they're a powerful unit with skills well worth the cost no matter where you build them.

Chapter 9: Devotion

THE first meeting between the King of Ruin and Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio was much calmer and friendlier than anyone could anticipate.

The meeting was held in the Throne Room inside Mynoghra's Palace. Takuto was surrounded by his subordinates and Botchling bodyguards, who quietly watched the proceedings. Meanwhile, in a move that was out of character for him, Vittorio had come to the meeting with a girl who seemed to be his aide. Oddly enough, Atou was absent, but no one seemed to mind as the audience between king and Hero began.

"Hero VITTORIOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! Requestin' an audience before your greatneess!"

The Hero respectfully paid homage to his king with a bow, apologized for not coming sooner, and reiterated his allegiance. The king responded casually and benevolently, though his voice still held an edge of majesty and authority.

At first glance, it was a picture-perfect meeting between master and servant. A formal exchange of words with nothing to nitpick that may or may not be later recorded in the annals of history.

But anyone with the slightest insight could easily see how the Throne Room had already turned into a verbal battlefield. Takuto scrutinized his subordinate's every move and utterance to determine the truth behind them. Meanwhile, Vittorio was there to explain his actions and prove his unwavering loyalty to the king.

"Granted. Thanks for coming, Vittorio."

They were feeling each other out still.

The council members watching over them had no idea how Takuto truly felt about this meeting with Vittorio. On the surface, it looked like they were having a peaceful conversation. But the whole of Mynoghra had spent every minute possible lodging complaints about this Hero's outrageous behavior. No one was foolishly optimistic enough to think the meeting would end without issue.

"It seems you were working tirelessly while I was immobilized. Thank you," Takuto said. "It took a while, but I'm glad I finally got a chance to speak with you."

"You neeeedn't thank moi! It's only natural for an empire's Hero to work

themselves to the bone for their Commander! The king is just supposed to be there, and his subjects are just supposed to be wholly devoted to him! Such is the waaaay of the world. Divine provideeeence!”

Takuto let a beat of silence pass. “I see. Well then, it’s nice to meet you again. I’m Takuto Ira. Do you remember me?”

“Of course I remember!” Vittorio trumpeted. “You are a man of incomparable intellect who mastered *Eternal Nations*! The invincible, unbeatable genius who overcame all obstacles and hardship with brilliance! *Takuto Ira* is, in a word, the pinnacle of all existence! The man who stands at the top! The one and only Player I bow befoooooore!”

“Haha. It’s embarrassing every time I hear that stuff. But I’m happy you also remember the days we shared together.”

“How could I forget! I’ll never forget! Oooh, my Great God! Almighty Lord! I have not—and never will—forget the days I spent together with you!”

Takuto glanced around the room and noticed all the Dark Elves had dubious looks on their faces. The fact that Mynoghra was a civilization from a strategy game called *Eternal Nations* was one of Takuto’s hard-kept secrets. And Vittorio casually mentioned it despite knowing that.

Was he trying to gain control of the conversation by stirring things up? Or did he want to revel in the Dark Elves’ confusion as an appetizer before the main course? Or did he simply forget to keep up appearances in his excitement?

Whatever the case, the easily misled Dark Elves had no idea what he was referring to. These situations were easy to handle because they accepted the unknown terms as words from the Land of the Gods.

Unable to contain his exhilaration, the corners of Takuto’s lips curled up in a slight smile. *When was the last time I had an interaction where I had to constantly read into my opponent’s hidden motives?* He preferred situations where he had to stay on his toes when tackling a conversation with someone.

Conflict can occasionally be enjoyable.

Takuto was always more of a hotblooded person.

But he had a position of authority to consider now. If this was just a game or he didn’t care about his opponent, he would happily act according to his desires. However, Takuto was now the ruler of a country and the responsibility that came with that position changed his options.

Guess I should start by reprimanding him for his self-serving behavior... Takuto thought. *Huh, now that I think about it, this is the first time I’ve ever pointed out a subject’s problem behavior in an official manner. Everybody’s been so obedient, a warning’s usually more than enough. I suppose...this might become more necessary in the future.*

Now then, how to play this?

Takuto needed to make an example of Vittorio in front of his other subordinates. And he had no qualms about having to do it either. Just reward and punishment are the foundation of any organization. But such concepts tended to take on an entirely different meaning when it came to Vittorio...

"I've received reports on your actions," Takuto said. "Your achievements speak for themselves, but you went a little too far acting on your own authority. Knowing your personality, it might be hard to have expected anything else from you, but I can't have you going out of your way to cause trouble for the others."

"Moi's behavior is problematic, you say? Then I'll accept any punishment to atone!" Vittorio exclaimed. "If that's what's necessary *right now*, then punish away! I'm ready and rearing for it! Yessiree! If that is what's necessary *right here and now*! Let's hop right to it! Put moi through your most stimulating and extreme punishment, King!"

"Yeah, you sound all for it. Hmm, what's the perfect punishment for you... It's hard to choose."

"By the by," Vittorio interjected, "I can transform pain and suffering into titillating pleasure! Now, bring it on!"

And that was the real problem when trying to punish Vittorio. No matter what punishment he was given, this Hero's *unique* traits had a way of turning most punishments into a reward. Punish him with pain and suffering? You're practically rewarding the man. Strip him of his status and authority? See how far that gets you.

Now, you might finally get somewhere if you can humiliate him, but was humiliation even possible for the Hero who got off on mocking everything and everyone around him?

Takuto made several revisions to his future policies and reconsidered his choices.

"I'd hate to disappoint you with a half-baked punishment..." Takuto said. "Oh well. Let's save it for later and go with something we can all agree on then. You're all good with that too, right, guys?"

"Yes, sire!"

The Dark Elves looked less than happy about it. They were disappointed Vittorio wouldn't be handed his punishment right away, but they were willing to accept it since he would be punished eventually. At least, that's what Takuto guessed they were thinking from the looks on their faces.

It seemed a bit remiss of a ruler to give orders while keeping an eye on the moods of his subordinates, but this was the exact situation he wanted. Now was not the time to punish Vittorio.

With that decision made, Takuto continued to question Vittorio. “With that settled, on to the next matter. Vittorio, about the religion with no official name you founded—everyone already calls it The Cult of Ira, so let’s just go with that. Care to tell me your reason for founding it?”

“Why, I naturally founded it for Great God Takuto Ira—and moi’s own dreams!”

“Hmm,” Takuto hummed, contemplating his words, for he had no knowledge of Vittorio’s “dream.”

There were no entries pertaining to his dreams anywhere within *Eternal Nations*.

Vittorio is a manipulating and condescending Hero. He views everything and anything as his toys and has given up on the world. Not even Takuto expected him to bring up having dreams he wanted to come true.

And what in the world is that dream? The answer was presented to him before Takuto could put that thought into words.

“I dream of becoming a cute girl and serving next to the Great God Takuto Ira!” Vittorio declared. “I’m a happy-ending fundamentalist! All ends well as long as God and Moi are together! That is my dreeeeeeeam!”

“Ugh, my head hurts...” Takuto groaned.

“By the waaaaay, I have a rough illustration of what I look like as a hot girl. Wanna see?”

Exasperation melted away the tension in the room. The Dark Elves sighed, thinking Vittorio had launched into more of his nonsense again. Meanwhile, the girl Vittorio had brought as his supposed aide couldn’t hide her shock and upset over him abruptly rambling on about his delusions in such a sacred space. Everyone took this as more of Vittorio’s poor taste in jokes.

But Takuto had a headache for an entirely different reason. He was concerned that Vittorio’s nonsense was as much true as it was a joke.

Vittorio tended to do crazy things. *Eternal Nations* said as much about him in his flavor text, and his actual AI often acted the part.

Only Takuto knew the truth. He knew Vittorio’s many mysterious actions in the game often had a cleverly hidden purpose. Takuto had reigned as Vittorio’s master because he could discern what that purpose was—though not always perfectly.

Vittorio had received admiration, surprise, and perhaps some consternation from many people. So it felt a bit unsettling to dismiss this admission as a joke. In other words, there was every possibility that he was serious.

“I don’t need to see the illustration,” Takuto demurred. “And anyways, wouldn’t it be kind of hard to make that dream a reality? At the very least, you

won't ever get me to go along with it..."

"The stupider the dream, the more brilliantly they shine! The more maddeningly you want it to come true, the more you can't get it out of your head! That's a dream, tried and true! *Un rêve devenu réalité*. Dreams come true! I'll do it! I'll become an adorably cute and clumsy bunny girl and get a one-way ticket to a happy end with God!!"

"Only if you can pull it off," Takuto said, letting the disbelief creep into his voice. "Is that something you *can* do?"

"I can!" Vittorio chirped. "Let me return the question to you: do you think I *can* 't?"

"I see... You're just brimming with confidence, aren't you? My headache is getting worse."

Words of ambiguous truth were layered into the meaningless exchange. Takuto quite enjoyed solving the riddles Vittorio brought him. He was especially motivated by the unspoken challenge. The hint to unlocking his true intentions likely lay with the girl he brought with him.

Takuto's gaze shifted to the scared-stiff Goatman girl—Yona'Yona. "That reminds me, it's the first time I've seen you."

"I-I-It's a pleasure to be in your presence for the first time! My God!"

Yona'Yona was startled to be addressed.

Takuto had heard about her beforehand. She was the Lector of the Cult of Ira that Vittorio had founded.

I bet he picked her because of her connections, but it sure is a weird choice, Takuto thought.

Perhaps because the Cult of Ira had indoctrinated her, Yona'Yona's nervousness and awe at having been spoken to by her God made it hard for her to process her emotions. She was showing an amusing amount of panic since he'd called on her.

"Hm. What do you think?" Takuto glanced up at the ceiling and asked, a wry smile playing on his lips over the girl's reaction.

Responding to his query, his Botchling bodyguard soundlessly landed in front of him. The grotesque creature that couldn't be classified as either male or female acted on Takuto's orders and directed its gaze toward Yona'Yona. Then it cheerfully babbled in an adorable babylike voice, "Muh-mah!"

"I see. So she's really a normal girl with nothing special about her," Takuto interpreted.

"A perfect display of a Botchling's Detect! How very cautious of someone so omniscient!" Vittorio challenged him about the intent behind his actions with a tone of surprise that implied he didn't expect it.

It was certainly a cautious move, but Takuto had gone through his fair share of bad experiences for acting cocky, so he had every reason not to forego caution.

“A lot’s happened recently,” Takuto admitted. “Someone I thought was an ally was actually an enemy in disguise. You should be careful too, Vittorio. The unexpected always comes suddenly and silently.”

“Mm-mm-mm! A warning from the great Takuto Ira himself! What a boon!”

Considering Vittorio’s personality, this Yona’Yona girl had to have been prepared for some purpose. Takuto planned on figuring out what that purpose was, but he could at least remove Mimic and any other such skill being used on her from the list of possibilities now, which was a minor relief. After all, he didn’t think he’d see through Vittorio’s schemes that easily.

“Whoops, we got off topic again,” Takuto said casually. “So, what kind of work has Vittorio here entrusted you with?”

Takuto had every right to question her. But just that one query pushed Yona’Yona past her limit—her cheeks turned scarlet and she flapped her lips open and closed like a fish out of water. She was apparently too nervous to speak or even squeak for that matter.

Mynoghrans were generally in such awe of Takuto that they were often paralyzed with nervousness when he spoke to them directly. This was a common sight, and aside from his close subordinates, ordinary citizens were always timid when Takuto addressed them. And yet this girl’s behavior went several steps beyond that, clearly revealing what kind of position Takuto held as the God the Cult of Ira worshipped.

“Y-You needn’t be so nervous,” he stuttered. “See, your nervousness is rubbing off on me.”

Her nervousness caused Takuto’s social ineptitude to kick in, making him uncomfortably restless. Vittorio caught on to what was happening between them and intervened.

“This here is Yona’Yona,” he introduced. “She’s the Second Plan I’ve prepared, soooo I’ve had her memorize some of my woook!”

“Your Second Plan?” Takuto glanced at Yona’Yona with a quizzical expression.

Yona’Yona shrunk in on herself, shaken to the core by Takuto’s gaze, but that’s not what caused the doubts to creep into his mind. No, he was caught up with Vittorio going in a direction that was unlike him. This schemester of a Hero shouldn’t be capable of trusting others. He was the type who wanted to do everything himself. He wasn’t the type to develop strategies with backup plans.

And that's why Takuto felt something was off.

"That's right," Vittorio said. "Everything needs a Second Plan! Even as a God, don't you also need a Second Plan for when those Dark Elves of yours screw up, *Takuto Ira*? It's easy to replace useless pawns!"

"How dare you!" Elder Moltar roared.

Vittorio was blatantly mocking them. The Dark Elves lost their tempers. Takuto raised his hand for the nth time that day to stop them before all hell broke loose.

I see, Takuto thought. Now I understand why Vittorio declared right here and now the need for a Second Plan. If I'm right, then I can see why he screwed around with the Dark Elves and Atou so much from the moment he was summoned.

"I see," Takuto said. "You plan to replace everyone living in the Accursed Lands."

"Right you are!!"

That was enough to convince Takuto. This Hero never trusted anyone from the start. Not the Dark Elves, not Atou. And that was why he'd prepared troops he could control himself.

Now that is more in line with a direction he'd go, Takuto thought. This so-called Second Plan of his must also have a catch. It's refreshing to see him hiding everything as he puts on a show while marching single-mindedly toward his objective. A schemester isn't a schemester if he's not always scheming.

Happy with what he'd learned from the master of schemes, Takuto cut straight to putting the pressure on. Not on Vittorio, but on the nervously trembling girl beside him.

"I know you all have plenty you'd like to say, but suck it up for now," Takuto told the Dark Elves before turning to the girl. "Yona'Yona, was it? You're the stand-in Lector for Vittorio, right? Isn't that difficult? Vittorio has a terrible personality, as I'm sure you know. Isn't he always causing you trouble?"

"S-Shat's not strue!" she said, slurring her words. "I can endure any trial for God!"

"You just implied that moi's a nuisance~!"

Takuto ignored Vittorio's interjection and looked warmly upon Yona'Yona. He did his best to be kind to the overly anxious girl, speaking in a way he hoped would help her open up.

"I see. I know he's a big fat pain, but I'm counting on you. I have high expectations for you. Oh, I know. Is there anything you want? Getting an autograph or something is standard fare when meeting with someone famous, right?" he ventured.

“I-Idolatry is forbidden!”

Takuto tilted his head at that one, confused for once. *Isn't it a little too zealous to treat an autograph as an object of worship?* he wondered. He found it even more curious that the Cult of Ira forbade idolatry. And pretty severely, judging by Yona'Yona's extreme reaction.

“Well, that's something... Why is that? Even something as simple as an autograph is forbidden?”

Flustered by Takuto's skepticism, Yona'Yona rushed to explain her reasoning, occasionally tripping up on how formal she should be. “U-Um, preppin'—er, preparing idols is considered the biggest taboo. Prayer matters most in the Cult of Ira, and we mustn't ever mistake where that prayer is to be directed.”

Yona'Yona fell silent after squeezing all that out. Her nerves seemed to have dried out her throat, because her voice sounded uncharacteristically hoarse and feeble. But her words made it to Takuto.

She wanted to abide by God's teachings, but doing so would mean denying what God was saying to her right now. She was clearly suffering from contradictory behavior.

“I see. You've gathered the power of prayer in me. Then let's forget my offer just now,” Takuto told the Goatman girl in such a kind voice it even surprised him. He must've pitied her more than he realized. Satisfied to see relief fill her young face, Takuto shifted his gaze toward Vittorio, silently observing their exchange.

“So, you brought me back from unconsciousness by gathering the power of prayer in me...?” Takuto muttered to no one in particular.

Vittorio merely grinned away at those words, neither denying nor confirming them.

“That isn't all, is it?” Takuto prompted.

“Now, what do *you* think, my god?”

Vittorio slyly evaded even direct questions. Or rather...the fact he was avoiding making any explicit statements here was proof he was employing some kind of strategy.

Takuto gave his head a light shake and pressed his fingers to his forehead as if to say “Don't increase my workload.” He was halfway resigned to the fact that was inevitable.

Either unaware of the mental exhaustion he was causing Takuto, or doing it

“Huh. Sludge Tits—er, I mean Sludge Atou isn't here. I assume there's a reason for thaaaat?”

He just steered the conversation in an entirely different direction. Vittorio

was already finished with his first performance. Was he satisfied that he'd freely shared only what he wanted to share? Or was it just him asking out of curiosity or an abundance of caution? Whatever his reasoning, Vittorio changed the topic to ask about the absence of Takuto's confidant.

"The reason why Atou isn't here? That's a funny question, Vittorio. Life's more difficult for you if she's here, right?"

Vittorio and Atou had a relationship like cats and dogs. The Gleeful Spin Doctor didn't hold any particularly special feelings about her, but Sludge Atou harbored such deep hatred for him it couldn't even be measured with words. So Takuto didn't invite Atou to this meeting. If he had, the two of them would have quarreled, and even if Takuto had asked them to stop, their conversation would've been interrupted and derailed to an obnoxious level.

Everyone in the room, including Vittorio, acknowledged that was the motive behind Takuto's decision. Curiously, Takuto's consideration brought an even broader smile to Vittorio's always-grinning face.

"Yes, yes. Too true. I'm greaaaatly pleased by your kind consideration! After all, that lady is greaaaatly incompatible with moi! I just don't know what her problem is!"

"I see. Then it all works out."

Some understanding passed between them that only they were privy to. The conversation between the Gleeful Spin Doctor and the King of Ruin tended to bounce around from topic to topic and didn't make sense at times. It was like listening to terribly inebriated philosophers debating their own research results. Listening to them gave the Dark Elves a strange feeling that there was more insinuated there, yet it was just for show—that there was intention behind it, yet not.

But no one was foolish enough to believe their conversation had no meaning. They were just on an entirely different level of thinking, so they couldn't follow the war of words between these great minds.

"But! But my Great God! You just confirmed it for me! No matter what ideas or strategies you come up with, I'm one step ahead of you this round!" Vittorio declared with great pomp.

Takuto's lips curled into a smirk. *So he did employ some tactic to pull this off*, he thought, some twisted form of delight manifesting on his features.

Vittorio was the Hero of trickery and intrigue. That was exactly why even the master, whom he should bow down and serve with all his being, had become the target of his deception. No blood would be shed. Whatever direction the match went, it likely wouldn't be a huge disadvantage for either party.

But in this very moment, the first shots in the battle between Takuto and

Vittorio had been fired.

“I see. Are you implying I’ve already played right into your hand?” Takuto asked. “Haven’t you considered the possibility that I’ve already seen that hand coming and have a counter prepared?”

“Hmnn. Nevertheless, this is the strongest, ultimate strategy I’ve ever put my full being into crafting. It’s already come to be, all that’s left is to leisurely wait for the finishing touch. At this point, not even the great *Takuto Ira* can undo it. You’ve already proven that to me.”

What about their conversation led Vittorio to that conclusion? Did Atou’s absence hold that much significance? Or was there something else hidden there? Contrary to his subordinates’ turmoil, Takuto’s expression remained unchanged, leaving his thoughts undetectable.

“But! Fear not, great one! There’s nothing inconvenient about my dreams for you! This is moi’s gift to you, my perfect and complete God, *Takuto Ira*!” Vittorio trilled.

“I see, I see... It’s very typical of you to think that everything will turn out how you want it to, but... I think it’d do you some good to give you a good raking over the coals before your cockiness comes back to bite you in the future.”

“If it so pleases you. Buuuut, let me declare now that you will soon change your mind.”

A dangerous aura filled the room.

Vittorio had just disrespectfully challenged his master.

Tension so thick you could cut it with a knife dominated the air. Gia and Elder Moltar silently wielded their weapons so they could leap into action and slit Vittorio’s throat at a moment’s notice.

Vittorio had made his intent to betray the king as clear as he possibly could without outright stating it. He opposed the king’s wishes and imposed his own. There was no one within this empire who didn’t know what that meant to the people of Mynoghra. And especially a Hero—he should understand the weight of his words more than anyone else.

Takuto would be the one to deliver his punishment personally—by bestowing a dishonorable death upon him.

But what transpired between them next...

“Wahahahahahaha! Heeheehee!”

“Pft! Ahaha!”

...was nothing short of the mischievous laughter between two naughty boys who’d pulled off a prank.

The Dark Elves and Yona’Yona exhaled their held breaths in relief now

that the tense atmosphere had dissipated. Both parties—and especially the king—were truly enjoying this exchange. The bystanders felt like their lives were saved just by realizing that fact, and they came to understand that this nauseating meeting was proceeding within allowable limits despite their opinions.

“Well, it’ll all come to light eventually. I’ll punish you then,” Takuto said. “Timing is key for things like this.”

“And when that time comes, it will become a memorable day that will never be forgotten by our country or Mynoghra!” Vittorio responded. “I quake in anticipation of that great day! The day of celebration! Let us put on a grand festival to celebrate!”

“Yeaah, sure. I look forward to it.”

The mood was friendly and casual, with no hint of the dangerous atmosphere from minutes earlier. There was still so much the Dark Elves didn’t know about the Heroes. In particular, it was fair to say the Dark Elves didn’t know much at all about the relationship between the king and his Heroes. There was a bond, some unseen trust, between this master and servant that they weren’t privy to. This little exchange drove that point home for them.

“Anyway, setting aside your methodology, I fully understand that you are thinking about me,” Takuto said. “Let’s table this topic for now. Man, that’s the most fun I’ve had in a while. It’s refreshing to have a conversation that really uses your brain like this. Makes me feel like a real king.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! What-ever are you saying? Your every word, your imposing authority, and dark aura are every bit that of an evil king! The very embodiment of the ruin that will bring about the destruction of everything in this world! Let us partake in even greater evil in the days ahead! I will glaaaaadly help you with that, yessiree!”

“Yeah, that’s promising. You really are quite promising.”

The King of Ruin and the Gleeful Spin Doctor—the strange and unfathomable showdown between master and servant was brought to a close for the time being. The Dark Elves had yet to glimpse what kind of outcome this collision of two great minds that think on another level would bring about.

Whatever the outcome...it would not be to the disadvantage of the empire of Mynoghra or to the Player Takuto Ira.

The King of Ruin stood on a plane of existence truly unfathomable to mortals. This war of words drove that point home for everyone present.

Now they only had one matter of business left to address. A matter none would question. In other words...

“All right, why don’t we get started on our turn to get us closer to conquering the world? What do you want Vittorio? I’ll prepare everything you

desire.”

The next move they needed to make was to conquer the many enemy forces living in this world.

Takuto threw his arms wide open and declared that he would prepare everything and anything for this purpose. Meaning that *Eternal Nations*’ top-ranked Player and most notorious troublemaker Hero were joining forces. The King of Ruin and the Gleeful Spin Doctor would brandish their powers without restraint.

“Mm, since you’re offeringggg...” Vittorio’s lips quirked up at the comment that could be taken as his master putting his full trust in him.

The Dark Elves and Yona’Yona couldn’t help but hold their breath when they thought of the impact it would have on the world when this master and servant worked toward the same goal.

What would their next move be? Malice lifted its long neck out from the depths of darkness in search of its next prey.

“I wanna borrow those two pipsqueaks—the Elfuur Sisterrrrs!”

The next move leapt into an entirely unexpected direction.

“UGH!!”

Two unladylike cries rang out from one corner of the Throne Room. Those were the shocked noises made by the twin sisters who’d lost all interest in the proceedings once they learned Vittorio wouldn’t be punished and decided to blend in with the décor to blandly watch over things after that.

They wanted to know why it had to be them. They exuded an aura of clear disdain at the idea of working together with such a despicable creature. Takuto anticipated Vittorio would request this and their reaction, but even he had to crack a wry smile at how they bristled like cats being forced to bathe.

“Ah, I knew it. You’re going after the Southern Province...” Takuto ventured.

“That’s because it’s the hottest area right now,” Vittorio responded. “And besides, we’ve got to deal with the circumstances surrounding my beloved and precious Mynoghra! Seeing as the sequence of Events has been condensed for a more efficient playthrough and skipped the info-dump of history one would expect in the tutorial, it’s urgent to expand our sphere of influence before we get swept away! You’ve already laid the groundwork for it, haven’t you, God?”

Takuto couldn’t help muttering “You’ve done it again” about Vittorio’s brilliance for seeing through his strategy like it was the most natural thing in the world. His brilliance was an asset right now. Takuto didn’t really care to be on the same mental wavelength as Vittorio, but he sure loved a relationship where the other person knew what he wanted without having to explain.

In any case, they needed to iron out the details. Even if that meant causing the twins to become even unhappier than they already were with the sudden misfortune that had befallen them.

"I can see the need for it, so I'll allow you to take the Elfuur Sisters with you," Takuto said. "By the way, I've received reports that one Saint is currently in the Southern Province. Can you deal with her?"

"With pleeeeeasure!" Vittorio exclaimed. "Saints are the greatest! They are the living hope of the deeply religious. Walking incarnations of love and kindness! I just adoooooore such shiny and sparkly gems like them! I'm absolutely positive that if we happen to cross paths, we will happily join hands! Why, I love, love, love stuff like hopes and dreams and hope and love!"

"...Uh, okay, okay. I get the point," Takuto said, exasperated. "Well, it seems like you haven't lost sight of the main objective, so I don't mind. You can go all-out as long as you don't let the girls get hurt."

Takuto glanced at the Elfuur Sisters. Both girls had their cheeks puffed out like chipmunks and their arms crossed in front of them in an X, fully rejecting his decision. Unfortunately for them, they were crucial to the next strategy. Takuto couldn't accept their refusal. To make matters worse, they would face many hardships throughout this strategy.

Takuto's head hurt just thinking about how to convince them. All the exhilaration coursing through him from his battle of wits with Vittorio instantly ran cold.

Angry girls are scary...

The King of Ruin became despondent.

"Oh me, oh my! God looks so warmly upon the *petit monstre*! Boo-boo! They must be his favorites! Moi's jealous! Oh, oh! What about moi's safetyyy?" Vittorio asked.

"You're welcome to die," Takuto said flatly.

"Mm-mm-mm!! Marvelous! Mm, with pleasure!"

Contrary to his concern for the twins, Takuto's response to Vittorio was plain cold. Then again, even coldness was the ultimate spice to this twisted Hero.

Takuto glanced at the still-quaking Yona'Yona while he addressed Vittorio with several points he felt needed to be reiterated. "You're welcome to pick who you use for this operation. If you need anyone outside of the Cult of Ira for it, go ahead and take them with you. On another note, the movements of the forces behind the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals are still a mystery. I'm sure you're already aware of this, but the abilities belonging to other forces can far exceed our expectations at times. Remain vigilant. We have many enemies standing in opposition to our dreams."

“Upon my name as the Gleeful Spin Doctor, it will be done.” Vittorio swept into a deep bow and accepted his orders with an unusual level of seriousness.

Takuto nodded, satisfied with his reassuring behavior. He was worried about the possibility of something entirely unexpected happening because Vittorio was being a little too promising, but planning how to deal with such things was the true charm of managing the empire known as Mynoghra.

“Don’t worry about the Elfuur Sisters,” Takuto said. “I’ll be sure to convey the importance of this operation to them.”

Takuto shifted his gaze to the Elfuur Sisters standing close to the wall. He would have his hands full trying to convince them when they were visibly angry about it, but strategically speaking, this was an obstacle he had to overcome.

Honestly, they might be even harder to deal with than Vittorio, he panicked.

“That’s all...I guess. At any rate, I’m happy I get to spend time with you again, Vittorio,” Takuto said.

“I, too, am overwhelmed with emotion to get to spend time with you, o great one! What a miracle! Now this is happiness! Mm-mm! I’ll do my best!”

“That’s great and all, but don’t overdo it,” Takuto cautioned. “I have high hopes for you. And you too, Yona’Yona. I spent most of my time talking to this guy today, so I’ll make some time once things settle down to speak with you too.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Little Yona’Yona’s so happy, she’s fainted while standing! And with that said, moi just got a huge list of things to dooooo, so I bid you ta-ta for now!” After executing another theatrical bow and scrape, Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio turned on his heel. He walked a few steps, scooped up Yona’Yona, who’d passed out with the whites of her eyes showing, and exited the room with her tucked under his arm like a sack of potatoes.

“I hope it all works out, Vittorio,” a delighted and truly encouraging voice called out to his back.

It was impossible for anyone to know what emotions those words stirred within Vittorio. All that could be said for sure was that his expression was unusually devoid of its usual mocking flippancy...



“**S-SO**...like I said, I’d like you girls to go with Vittorio and carry out the strategy to conquer the Southern Province with him... Um, you see, this is an

extremely important mission. I'd like to discuss why it's so important with you. Will you hear me out?"

"NEVER!!"

The Elfuur Sisters' screams could be heard behind Vittorio. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that this was all part of a scheme brought about by *Takuto Ira*'s profound wisdom.

Takuto Ira was the only player in *Eternal Nations* capable of controlling Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio.

Vittorio never forgot that fact, but it was very possible he hadn't fully taken what that meant into consideration. In order to achieve his dreams, he needed to get serious. The Gleeful Spin Doctor himself thought that, his face devoid of expression.



Spirit of Ruin

Magic Unit

Strength: 7 Move: 1

《Ruin Affinity +1》《Evil》

※ Unlocked with Six Major Elements

Description

~Inevitably called a spirit due to its nature, though it's utterly hideous.~

The Spirit of Ruin is a **Magic Unit** unlocked by researching the Six Major Elements.

They aren't any different from regular **Mages**, but since they have an affinity for **Ruin Mana**, their combat abilities are strengthened by increasing the amount of **Ruin Mana**.

And since they have an aptitude for all magic attributes, you can have them learn **Military Magic** depending on your strategy.

Chapter 10: Scheme

THE Trade City of Seldoch was located farther south than the Divine Nation of Lenea's capital. It was the border town closest to the Dark Continent. The nations exerting the strongest influence in the extremely inhospitable land of the Dark Continent were the multiracial empire of Phon'kaven and the empire of ruin, Mynoghra. Bordering these nations meant being strongly influenced by both, which were rapidly developing thanks to the various technologies and goods the King of Ruin provided. As it was, the Southern Province was in a state of dysfunction due to the conflict with the King of Ruin.

While the Scribe Saint was immediately sent to aid the Divine City Amrita, cities like Seldoch, which were reasonably sized but too far from Qualia, were left to fend for themselves. God's love is infinite, but the number of people who can be saved is limited, so Qualia had to decide where to focus their aid. And the Gleeful Spin Doctor wouldn't let such perfect circumstances go to waste...



<Seldoch First Parish Chapel, Temporary Treatment Center >

"*KOFF, koff*... Urgh, this cough ain't getting any better."

"I'm so sorry. Someone, please get this man some water..."

The hoarse and frail voices of the sick and suffering could be heard from every corner of the room.

The Elfuur Sisters were twin Witches born from tragedy. The younger sister, Caria, had unleashed the curse of Plague using the power of a fake full moon, and its reach extended all the way to this distant land from ground zero. The plague itself was similar to a painful cold. It had a long incubation period, was airborne, and could cause the infected to suffer a long recovery period if not treated, but aside from those factors, it wasn't a threat to healthy people. And this was exactly why it was so easily spread.

The asymptomatic happily went about their socialization and travel, spreading this Plague crafted by the hands of evil throughout the Southern Province. Where Takuto came from, this would be called a pandemic. The situation in Seldoch wasn't unique—similar scenes were unfolding in every city

and village across the land.

“Are you ALL RIGHT?! You’ll all get better in NOOOO TIME!”

The same held true for the First Parish Chapel. The chapel was designed not only for believers to worship within, but also as a temporary command post and evacuation center during a disaster. It currently had the atmosphere of a medical battlefield. Many people were slumped in chairs or on the floor, painfully gasping for air as they awaited treatment. Patients with severe symptoms had to lie down on makeshift beds on the floor, and although their lives weren’t in danger, they seemed to be in immense pain.

Caretakers ran around at all hours of the day as people with symptoms varying from mild to severe came seeking treatment. They couldn’t keep accepting patients. The chapel was so full of people, you couldn’t move without stepping on someone. Because there was no known cure, they could only treat the symptoms. And while people came in droves seeking aid, only a handful recovered and left.

It was only a matter of time before they’d reached capacity—nay, they’d long since passed that.

Amid the chaos, yet another patient was brought in. Was it a Paladin? The elderly man carried on the back of a young man wearing plate armor seemed to be suffering from serious symptoms and, in the words of the locals, he looked like he’d be entering God’s embrace any second now. He appeared to be suffering from pneumonia due to his old age rather than the plague, and combined with his rapid decline in physical strength, he was in a critical condition.

Even the mildest illness can be fatal to the elderly, children, and those with weak immune systems.

This old man would eventually succumb to his illness if left untreated. Even to the untrained eye, he was clearly in a precarious situation.

“Lector! Where’s the Lectooooor?! We’ve got an urgent case! An URGENT CAAAASE!!”

The Paladin sat the old man down in a chair, and someone who spotted them from a distance rushed over, shouting in a voice that echoed through the chapel. This was the same man zealously running around the chapel treating patients. He sounded deeply concerned for the lives of the people, but also lacked composure, like he was at his wits’ end over how to help everyone.

Who was this Lector he called for? Whoever it was, they must be someone of great import for such a charitable soul to be calling for them at the top of his lungs.

“It’s an URGENT PAAAATIENT! Please, LECTOOOOR! O great Lector

of the Cult of Ira!” he bellowed so loud, his voice boomed through the chapel. The owner of this ear-piercing shout was none other than Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio.

“Shut up, would ya? I’m standin’ right here. Are your eyes just for decoration?” snapped the Cult of Ira’s Lector, Yona’Yona, as she clucked her tongue with palpable irritation. She’d been standing next to Vittorio the entire time and had already grasped the elderly man’s condition. There was no way Vittorio hadn’t noticed her. He’d even made eye contact with her more than a few times.

“OOOOOH! Lector Yona’Yona, there you arrrre!”

And yet he continued with this obnoxious farce. He acted all happy, like someone whose friend had just shown up. He could tone it down a notch—or fifty.

Yona’Yona clucked her tongue again, making an even louder sound. Her expression screamed, “Don’t make me take part in this charade when I’m so damn busy!”

The sick elderly man shrunk away when he saw her reaction. He coughed profusely before squeezing out, “I-I’m so sorry...for making you waste y-your precious time on these raggedy old bones.”

“Oh, don’t worry ’bout it. I’m only in a bad mood because of that dancing idiot over there. Anyways, you must be in pain. Go on, lay down...” Yona’Yona said as she helped the old man lay down. Although her word choice was gruff, her voice was filled with compassion rather than coldness. Her caring gestures revealed her sympathetic nature.

Once Yona’Yona confirmed the wheezing old man’s breathing had stabilized a bit, she carefully looked around the room. The chapel was full. They couldn’t take in any more patients.

Yona’Yona sighed, thinking it was about time to get started on *that*, considering how things were going.

“Okaaaaaay, everybody eyes and ears over here! Our great Lector Yona’Yona is about to free all of youuuu from your sufferingggggg!” Vittorio trumpeted loudly, his timing perfectly lining up with hers, as if he’d sensed what she was thinking.

His loud voice drew the attention of everyone suffering from illness. Of course, their eyes gathered on Yona’Yona. She’d already experienced this a few times before, but this moment made her extremely uncomfortable every time.

She was just your average small-town girl. She’d never experienced being the center of attention. She felt especially uncomfortable about it because she was completely aware she wasn’t someone who deserved to be lifted up and

appreciated like this.

“Goooo on? Everyone is waiting for you, Yona’Yona. Go on, go on, go right on.” Vittorio was speaking in a deliberately loud voice to annoy Yona’Yona. It didn’t take a genius to see that.

Yona’Yona shot him and that irksome sneer of his a glare that could kill then glanced around the chapel until she confirmed the Elfuur Sisters were present. Then she cleared her throat and got into character.

“O Great God Takuto Ira! Please bestow your healing upon these poor souls!” Yona’Yona recited, both hands lifted toward the heavens.

Her delivery was a little stiff, but the people were focused on her earnest prayer for their salvation. What was about to occur? As they all wondered this, the ill and suffering townspeople didn’t realize that right after Yona’Yona petitioned God, she whispered something in a barely audible voice to someone else in the room.

“Now. Please.”

“On it...” Caria responded quietly.

The strangest thing happened next. All the pain vanished from the people as if God had scared away the disease. The illness that had tormented the people for so long, the suffering that stuck to them like sludge and never went away, left them as if willed away. It was almost like the illness had received a direct order from God and withdrew with its tail between its legs...

“I-It doesn’t hurt anymore! Wh-What in the Saints...”

“Wow! Praise God! The stabbing sensation in my throat is no more!”

The people voiced their confusion and joy. Even the old man, who’d been in agonizing pain, seemed to be on his way to recovery as his complexion rapidly improved. Not only was he cured of the unknown plague, but even the pneumonia left with it.

Yona’Yona raised her voice, a rare thing for her, to explain what had happened to the masses and the elderly man, who couldn’t hide his surprise at the dramatic change in his condition. “Um...our great and mighty Lord Takuto Ira has just performed a miracle. I didn’t do nothing—er, anything. I merely became the prayer worker who delivered your pleas to God. Offer up your prayers of gratitude to God. Please devote your prayers to our Great God, the one and only God, Lord Takuto Ira!”

It goes without saying that the aforementioned god, Takuto Ira, did no such thing. The god in question was currently doing paperwork to clean up after Vittorio’s many misdeeds and to provide backup for furthering the mission.

In other words, the miracle that had just happened—the driving away of the demon of ill health—was all the work of...

“Thanks,” Yona’Yona said. “Looks like it’ll work again this time.”

“That’s good.”

...one of the two Witches of Regret—Caria Elfuur.

“Wow! Was that a miracle?!”

“I can’t believe I get to be on the receiving end of one of God’s miracles!”

“The great and mighty God Takuto Ira... What a merciful God he must be!”

Shouts of joy rose from every corner of the chapel. They were the frenetic shouts of people whose energy had come roaring back after the illness that had been tormenting them was lifted. Joy, relief, excitement—various emotions filled their voices.

It’s not difficult to overcome a mild illness. They can be resolved relatively easily by using medicinal herbs with nourishing and healing effects, or by trained Mages and Clergy. However, the difficulty level increases astronomically when trying to cure many people all at once. It seemed so improbable; it could only be achieved by a god performing a miracle...

And that was what earned the people’s fanaticism. Faith and emotions go hand in hand, so naturally, their faith gathered for their new god, Takuto Ira.

“Oops,” Yona’Yona whispered, realizing she needed to get back into character. “God is overjoyed you have all recovered. Never forget His sacred name: *Takuto Ira*. That is the name of the absolute God who rules over Mynoghra, has not a single flaw, and is deserving of your faith and dedication...”

Caria Elfuur controls pestilence. Erasing a cursed plague she propagated herself was as easy as pie. There was no rule saying she couldn’t. It was no skin off her back matching the timing for removing the illness from people and playing it off as a miracle.

The people who spread the plague were being thanked for eradicating it. Could there be a more ridiculous farce out there? But as they say, ignorance is bliss—especially for weak, ordinary townspeople blown away by an innocent, powerful being...

People began dedicating their prayers all around Yona’Yona. They were praying to *Takuto Ira*. The power of prayer flowed into one place like a tidal wave.

“It’s a MIRACLLLLLE! I’ve just! Witnessed God’s miracle! With mine own eyesssss! Everybody! Did you see?! That was a miracle, it was! A real, true, bona fide miraclllle!”

Vittorio’s theatrical cries stirred up the others. Did his passion rub off on them? Or was it the work of one of his skills? Whatever it was, the people of

Seldoch were sucked into his vortex of enthusiasm.

“So loud...”

Meanwhile, the three girls bristled with displeasure. Vittorio didn't try to placate them or show any consideration for their feelings.

“Now then, I take it you will all dedicate your prayers to Great God Takuto Ira from henceforth?” Vittorio asked the chapel.

“Yes!” the townspeople replied as one.

This scene occurred every morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Vittorio gathered people from all parts of the city, performed a fraud dressed up as a miracle, and used enthusiasm, excitement, and an unhealthy dose of deception to indoctrinate them.

With impeccable timing, the Cult of Ira followers, there caring for the sick, began distributing scripture extolling Takuto Ira as a god.

The Cult of Ira had penetrated the heart of the city. With just one more push, the people would voluntarily swear their allegiance and request to move to Mynoghra—the empire of their God. In fact, such talk had already come up and resulted in Mynoghra dispatching several civil officials.

But there were some doubts.

The people of this land were devout believers in *holy* doctrine. Was it even possible for such deeply religious people to change their religion and alignment so easily? To make matters even more contentious, most of the Cult of Ira's followers were from Dragontan, meaning Beastmen comprised their largest demographic of believers. It was strange for the people of the Lawful Continent to accept Beastmen—including Lector Yona'Yona—when they viewed them in the same vein as the Barbarians plaguing the Dark Continent.

Of course, all of these matters had been addressed.

Vittorio wasn't one to neglect potential problems. And Takuto Ira wasn't one to forget to lay the groundwork.

In the middle of all the fanaticism, a lone Paladin glanced around uncomfortably. He was a genuine Paladin from the holy forces, and a lucky man who'd escaped disaster by not being in the capital of Amrita when the Divine Nation of Lenea fell.

“Hmmmmmm? Whatever is the matter, Monsieur Paladin?” Vittorio asked him. “Are you feeeling all right? Feeling a little under the weather there?”

“No, I'm fine. But I feel like... I'm forgetting something...? The God I pray to is...”

This was the young man who'd carried in the elderly sick man. He stared at the scene unfolding before him in a dumbfounded daze. Remaining silent made him stand out amid the din of everyone else's zeal. It was only natural for

Vittorio to take notice of him. But the young Paladin tilted his head in confusion, seeming not to even grasp why he was being spoken to.

“Hrrrm? How strange,” Vittorio said. “I’m positive we had all the residents of this city forget about the unnecessary stuff...? So be it. Let’s give it another whirrrr! Do your thing, girlie!”

“Seriously? Fine, fine...”

Vittorio did a comical twirl like he was staring in a musical and stopped with his finger pointed in one direction. On the other end was the older sister twin, Maria Elfuur. With an unmotivated response, she raised her hand over the baffled Paladin.

“Forget!”

“Hm? Strange? What was I...?”

Then, quite strangely, the Paladin’s demeanor completely changed—he looked refreshed. It was almost as if all of his worries were gone—as if he’d forgotten his concerns. There was no other way to explain the dopey expression on his face.

“Hrm, hrm, hrm,” Vittorio hummed. “Is he a Mesial Paladin? Resistance depends on the level. I thought we’d attentively made every Paladin Forget when we came to this city, but we should’ve double-checked. Hey, pipsqueak? Don’t tell me you’re getting sloppy with your work?”

“Suck it!”

“Gosh! What an attitude! Someone’s going through her rebellious phase.”

Vittorio gave an overblown reaction to Maria sticking her tongue out at him for insulting her work. He acted like her uncooperative attitude was unexpected, but everyone here had a terrible opinion of Vittorio. Yona’Yona and the twins were especially keen on insulting and rebelling against him. From how they treated him, it was easy to tell where he ranked in Mynoghra.

“Pardon, did something happen?” the Paladin asked, forgetting the prior conversation along with his faith in Arlos. All that remained was his desire to serve the people, a body honed through tireless training, and a strong faith that lost its object of worship. Nay, a new object of worship had already been prepared for him.

“No, no, don’t trouble yourself with us, Monsieur Paladin!” Vittorio said. “Oh, you know, just calling you a Paladin doesn’t really fit anymore. Why don’t we start calling you guys the Paladins of Ira?”

The man’s eyes lit up at that suggestion, for he’d just remembered his strong, burning faith. It may not have been exactly the same faith as it was a few days prior, but that meant little to a man with no memories of it. He’d already reached the point where he didn’t even understand why he was being called a

Paladin in the first place.

...He didn't need to understand it either.

"A Paladin of Ira! What a wonderful title! I will do my best to live up to the name of our Great God!"

"GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD!"

In a place the people of this world couldn't perceive, the man's alignment and affiliation had been changed.

Those who have no one to turn to are easily deceived. It was easier to win over people who'd lost their faith in their god and were no longer under anyone's protection than it was to take candy from a baby.

A Paladin—a *Paladin of Ira*—was a special position that required a high level of training. They had high combat abilities, training, education, and experience. Not many could serve in this role. With this, the forces of ruin had effortlessly obtained another useful pawn.



Paladin of Ira

Combat Unit

Strength: 3~7 Move: 1

<<Evil>> <<Holy Sword Artes>> <<Fanatic>> <<Cult of Ira>>

Paladins of Ira are former Qualia Paladins who fell to the dark side.

Despite converting to the Cult of Ira and becoming evil-aligned, they can still use Holy Sword Artes and are special units skilled at fighting evil forces despite their alignment.

The absence of ethics that came from becoming evil-aligned results in them being able to fully tap into the violence hidden within them, and it's said that they have an advantage over good-aligned Paladins of the same level.

This was the strategy the King of Ruin had laid the groundwork for and Vittorio enacted. Caria's Plague sowed chaos throughout the Southern Province, allowing them to worm into the people's hearts. Then Maria used her power of Forget to steal the people's faith in the Holy God Arlos, leaving a nice empty void for Takuto Ira to fill.

The Divine City Amrita, the capital of the Divine Nation of Lenea, had lost its ability to function as both a city and a state due to the machinations wrought by the manifestation of the King of Ruin in their land. The governing body was incapable of influencing or gathering information on any of its cities and smaller settlements. It was no wonder then that they couldn't function when Amrita was the epicenter for the Plague and Forget known as the King of Ruin's Curse. And it was only a matter of course that the troops dispatched with the Scribe Saint couldn't get around to the other affected areas when they'd never experienced chaos on this scale before and were stuck employing makeshift solutions on a daily basis.

Mynoghra's strategy was a clear case of shamelessly starting a fire to get credit for putting it out, all while robbing the homeowner blind.

Countless towns and villages had fallen into Mynoghra's hands this way, and all of their residents were smiling, expressing their gratitude, and praying to their new god as followers of the Cult of Ira. The Trade City of Seldoch was the finishing touch after they had converted all the surrounding areas.

Land, Productivity, Population, Military Power, Faith—this plan let Mynoghra gain it all in one fell sweep.

"Mm-mm-mm! This nation is just full of talented people ripe for the picking. And we can pick the juiciest ones all we want! I feel like a kid in a candy shop with no one to tell me no!"

The girls were in the worst mood because a certain fraudster hadn't stopped being loud and annoying, but at least their scheme was progressing smoothly.

Yona'Yona thought that if they kept up the good work, this city would soon completely belong to Mynoghra. And with how easily everything was going, she was eager to extend their reach to the rest of the Southern Province, but she would never have been put in charge of this mission if she was the type to act on impulse. She was entrusted with the job because she had the skills to merit it. In that respect, Yona'Yona was another key player in this plan.

As she was mulling over whether they had overlooked anything—since the Archlector was utterly unreliable—one of the followers entrusted with enumeration came to deliver a report.

"Lector Yona'Yona, with this most recent miracle, the city's indoctrination

rate has reached 70 percent. If God performs a few more miracles, we should be able to reach the rest by ministering to individuals.”

“Roger that. The more people who come to believe in God, the happier God will be. I don’t wanna give a pathetic report the next time I stand in His almighty presence. Let’s work hard together to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Yona’Yona said in her usual gruff tone.

“Moi too! I’ll work super duper hard! We can do it! Yes, we can!” Vittorio trilled.

“...Tch.”

Yona’Yona clicked her tongue in unison with the believer. Then she sorted out the information.

This city was taking more time to convert due to its large population, but it was clear that if they stayed for a few more days and performed miracles, it too would fall into their clutches. Arrangements were already underway in the Accursed Lands, Mynoghra’s imperial capital, for units and saplings of the Flesh Tree to be deployed to the newly acquired towns and villages.

It’s often said that offense is the best defense, and this particular strategy was ingenious because it reduced the enemy’s national power while bolstering their own. Yona’Yona could understand that much. But there were naturally things she didn’t understand even after being thoroughly trained by Vittorio and having come to successfully infer what people were thinking to a degree.

“Hey, Archlector Idiot. Why was I picked for this role? It honestly makes me sick to my stomach... Wouldn’t it go faster if you did it?” she asked the question that had been plaguing her.

It was a simple question asking why she had to play the role of Lector. She was looking right at a more qualified person. Wouldn’t things go even smoother if Vittorio took up the mantle himself? That was her thought.

Of course, expecting a decent answer from Vittorio was foolish.

“Moi? Dirty my own hands? Ew, no thank you. I can push all the annoying stuff on you by putting you out front. And it comes with the lovely bonus of getting to watch you suffer, Yona’Yona. I can’t be stopped! I won’t be stopped!!”

“Ugh, you are such a— I’m holding myself back because we’re in the middle of a divine mission from God, but once this is over, I’m gonna rip you a new one...”

“Oh my! Attitude, young lady!”

Although Yona’Yona never realized it, the real reason Vittorio placed her in a conspicuous position was to make it easier for him to move behind the scenes. If he took up the mantle of Archlector in front of everyone, it would

hinder his mobility. He took her in and set her up because he despised being shackled to a position. It was a matter of pride that he held the title of Archlector in the shadows despite that. He was loud and proud about the fact his faith in Takuto was the strongest of them all...

“I’m blinded by God’s greatness! I can’t see through the tears! *Sniffle*.”

“It’s something else, all right... It’s the first I’ve ever seen one of God’s miracles. God’s miracles are big stuff.”

“God...is seriously awesome. Lord Takuto Ira is seriously awesome.”

It was up for debate whether Vittorio’s Convert skill had worked a little too well or if he used a bit too much of his Brainwash skill, because a group of the young men who’d been cured of a nasty cough got a fanatical gleam in their eyes as they praised God. Of course, the God they now praised differed from the one they’d worshipped only a few days ago.

It was child’s play for a Hero with a catalog of skills designed to manipulate people to alter their faith and religious beliefs. The people had also obtained freedom from suffering due to their conversion. It was much easier to take advantage of people’s feelings of gratitude and redirect them than to twist the facts and brainwash them.

The evil wrought by the Gleeful Spin Doctor disempowered people’s minds without them ever realizing it.

“Okay, let’s push through until we can save the rest! Please call all the poor little sheep here! Unlike other gods, our Lord Takuto Ira has an infinite supply of miracles! His love will never run out! He will save you all from the evil running rampant in this land!!” Vittorio spread his arms and proclaimed loudly as a stream of people dropped by on their way home, guided by Ira’s followers. “Once he saves this city, he will save the next! Once he saves that one, he will save the one after that and the one after that!”

It almost sounded as if he were claiming they would fill every corner of the world with followers of Ira.

“Once he saves everyone here, what next? Why, the north! And then further north! There are countless people who are still suffering and waiting for our God’s favor!”

North—meaning the center of the Southern Province and the Divine Nation of Lenea’s capital, Amrita. The land where Scribe Saint Lytrain and Inquisitor Imlerith were desperately trying to help people. There was no way this man, who was as smart and cautious as a venomous snake in the grass, didn’t know that.

Then his objective could be but one—Saint Lytrain.

Attempting to embroil even a Saint in his schemes—did that stem from an

overconfidence in his own abilities or arrogance?

Unfortunately, no one around could keep Vittorio in check. He was too free, too uninhibited. Above all, the impact his actions would bring was too great.

“Er... Is it really all right to let *that* thing loose?” Yona’Yona fretted to the Elfuur Sisters, exhausted now that she’d gotten her first sense that things were going in a bad direction.

“I can’t imagine anything good coming out of it, but His Majesty will take all responsibility in the end...” Caria said.

“His Majesty should reap what he sows,” Maria griped.

Even the twins had given up on trying to control the situation. Not that they ever had the ability to control it from the very start. This was just a reminder of that fact.

“We have orders to abandon that bad man and just bring Miss Yona’Yona back with us if everything goes south, so don’t worry,” Caria told her.

“Mr. Perv stands out, so let’s use him as fodder,” Maria grinned.

“Perfect. You’re the best, you guys,” Yona’Yona said.

The Gleeful Spin Doctor was still working his wicked magic even while the girls were calmly discussing how to use him as bait. He twirled and danced around like a titillated madman, brainwashing people as much as his skills would allow.

“Long live the Cult of Ira! Long live Takuto Ira! Come one, come all, offer your prayers to our Great God! Go forth, little shepherds! Invite all your friends!”

Vittorio’s strategies continually produce the best results. His battle of wits with his master, Takuto Ira, also continued to produce the best results. His plan had no obstacles.

The happiness he sought—he was carefully, ever so carefully, paving the road to it.

...The holy forces of Qualia had not yet prophesized the arrival of a new apocalypse-bringer.



Lector Yona'Yona

Person

Race: Beastperson (Goatman)

Empire: Mynoghra

Role: Lector of the Cult of Ira

NO IMAGE

Description

~ An ordinary girl whose only strength is her faith.
But such people are the best to prop up as figureheads.~

The life of Yona'Yona, essentially the true Archlector of the Cult of Ira, can be described as being full of ups and downs. Abandoned at an orphanage by her parents during the Barbarian attack on Dragontan, she'd unwittingly become a citizen of Mynoghra and a follower of the Cult of Ira, and before she knew it, she'd been inserted into the position of Lector.

Although she ended up in her current position without having a say in it, she's not dissatisfied. She started to think that she wanted to save others just like she'd been saved. And that's the motive that drives her. She's also an extremely valuable person who can directly punish Vittorio, and among the followers of Ira, she is highly regarded as the most suitable person to lead them.

Chapter 11: Folly

THE news came to Krähe Imlerith, the Inquisitor in charge of Lenea's restoration, just as it became possible to cure the epidemic plaguing the Divine City Amrita. Once they rebuilt this city, which had the largest population in the Southern Province and had sustained the most damage, the rest of their work would go much smoother. The urgent news came in just as she thought they could finally breathe a little, and it pertained to something they had feared was coming from the start.

The forces of evil had begun a second invasion.

It sounded better to describe the situation away as having fallen one step behind their enemies, but it really came down to the simplest of mistakes—failing to confirm what was going on around them. Everyone was so busy with the task at hand, they all believed someone else was looking into it, when no one was. Then again, perhaps it was expecting too much of Qualia's clergy to know how to act during times of crisis when their nation had been at peace for ages.

Everyone falsely believed Mynoghra wouldn't reinvade. Or at least, not for a long time. Their false sense of security was coming back to bite them.

"Are the reports true?" Krähe asked.

"Yes, communication has been severed with all of the towns and villages in the southernmost region, including Seldoch."

It took Krähe a few long seconds to fully understand the meaning behind what the soldier told her with a stiff face.

Communication with other cities was often delayed. The messenger or the person dispatched to investigate might've fallen behind schedule due to unavoidable circumstances, or they might've been neglecting their duties, or just outright incompetent. As much as no one liked to acknowledge it, things not going according to plan for various reasons was the norm for the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. But there was nothing normal about losing contact with an entire region. Especially when that region just so happened to be concentrated around the southernmost part of the Southern Province...

"That's...bad news," Krähe said. "Have you received any reports or heard rumors about anything unusual happening in the city?"

“No. We haven’t found anything unusual, nor has there been any word of the people being in danger. The towns and villages are avoiding contact with us. All of the messengers are turned away before they can ask what is wrong ...”

It was a strange report. No matter how paralyzed Amrita’s functions as a capital city were or how much control it lost over the rest of the Southern Province, it was inconceivable for the entire region to rebel. As far as they knew, the King of Ruin’s curse of forgetfulness was limited to the capital and hadn’t affected the other towns yet. They had confirmed as much during their preliminary investigation, which was why Krähe focused on restoring Amrita instead of splitting up her troops. She acted with every belief that Arlos’s faithful would fulfill their respective duties and overcome the pandemic throughout the province...

“The messengers are making it clear that they are divine agents for the Scribe Saint, yes?” Krähe asked to be sure. “Refusing contact without due reason is an act of treason against the Saint. Making it a direct betrayal of God.”

“Yes, you are absolutely right, Inquisitor! However...well, I can’t do much about it...” the soldier squirmed.

“Ah, right. My apologies. I don’t mean to criticize you. I just needed... confirmation. It seems I lost my cool there,” Krähe apologized to the cowering soldier and stopped her pen hand. She took several deep breaths, but each came out as shallow huffs of air. She tried to calmly grasp the situation, but her confusion exceeded what she could handle. Her beautiful, long fingertips trembled in silence.

I heard that the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals had lost contact with each of its clans too. This is bad news indeed. Our situations are too similar, she thought.

The El-Nah Alliance of Elementals—it was already public information that the good nation run by Elves had fallen into the hands of evil, sparking a world crisis. The Mystic Saint was currently taking measures against the problem, but Arlos’s Miracle Artes showed no signs of resolving this freak phenomenon that was unlike anything in all of Qualia’s long history.

As it was, the departure of the Southern Province along with two Saints had critically weakened Qualia. It was the sacred responsibility of Qualia to drive away evil in the name of Arlos, but willpower alone isn’t strong enough to solve every problem...

They needed the means—powerful means—to overturn the odds in their favor...

“Please summon the most prominent Paladins,” Krähe said. “I would like to consider our next move.”

Always assuming the worst-case scenario and reacting appropriately is a skill necessary for those in positions of power and entrusted with the lives of others. Krähe thought of the many people living in the regions they had lost contact with.

Ah, but was this truly the *worst-case* scenario for the shining kingdom of light blessed by the holy god? Of that she was not sure... Only a foreboding of ever-increasing shadows drawing closer to the light of Arlos haunted her dreams.



Krähe's meeting went in circles, never getting anywhere. She'd summoned the Paladins to tackle the emergency, but no one came up with any solutions. Who could blame them? They never expected to face such a threat and couldn't conceive an immediate answer.

That said, they were people too. They required rest. Getting a brief change of pace when stuck at an impasse tends to help things go smoother after the fact. For this reason, they took a break, and Krähe used her free time to patrol the town, hoping it'd unravel her wound thoughts.

Our situation is dire, and evil is just outside our door. Meanwhile, Nerim's memory consumption is at an all-time high. Arlos, what should we do...?

Krähe had considered retreating from the Southern Province. If they withdrew to Central, they could expect support from the Mystic Saint and prevent the worst-case scenario. But they couldn't just abandon people in need. And it'd be delusional to even consider bringing everyone back to Central.

Either way, Krähe needed to stay here.

If only I could abandon everything and run away with Nerim. Wicked thoughts dominated her mind, wrenching a wry smile out of Krähe at the realization her true feelings were surprisingly weak and pitiful for someone serving in such an esteemed role as Inquisitor.

Then she heard it...the faint cries for help.

"Somebody! Help! HELP MEEEEEE!"

"...Oh no!"

Krähe took off running like the wind. The cries for help came from quite a distance, but that was no hindrance to her. Before long, she came to a stop in one corner of the mazelike city.

The scene of distress seemed to be taking place at the end of a poorly lit alleyway. She heard the unceasing cries for help and something being hit. Someone was likely being assaulted by a thug, and there was a chance the victim

was seriously injured, so she needed to rescue them as soon as possible.

If someone is suffering, it's the duty of Qualia's soldiers to save them. The same applied to an Inquisitor like Krähe.

She dashed as carefully and quickly as her feet would carry her through the dark alleyway. Soon she was upon the scene where several men surrounded someone.

"What are you doing?!" she roared, though she did not draw her sword. She deemed it too extreme to wield her blade for a citizen's quarrel. Of course, should their actions require it, she wouldn't hesitate, but Krähe wouldn't lack in a fight against a normal person even without her sword.

However...

"Stop!"

She became extremely wary of the hair-raising strangeness of the situation. First, all of the ruffians who'd turned around at her shout had dead, vacant eyes and were mumbling something under their breath as foam dribbled from their mouths.

Second, there was something strange about the victim's attire. He seemed to be dressed like a street performer and not the type seen around these parts. Her eyes were especially drawn to his lanky and gangly body.

Lastly...

"Oooh! It's one of Qualia's Lady Clergy! I'm saved!"

The man rose to his feet without a sound, casting a long shadow. Despite having just been beaten, he stood as if nothing had happened at all. He dragged his hawkish gaze over her, a devilish glint in his dark eyes.

"Who are you...?" Krähe moved on instinct. She braced her knees and placed her dominant hand on the hilt of her sword. She sucked in a small breath and sent strength throughout her body.

"I'm Vittorio. Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio, at your service."

The man executed a respectful bow. His perfected gesture seemed almost theatrical and lacked sincerity.

Yes, I know without you telling me. I know without conversing.

There was only one explanation for who the man in front of her was—to his skin-crawling appearance.

"I am Vittorio—from MYNOGHRAAAAAAAAA!"

Lastly...was the strong evil presence emanating from him.

The archnemesis of the forces of good had suddenly shown up right in front of her.

"O Lord our maker! Grant my sword the strength to defeat evil!"

The flash of her sword was faster and sharper than any other. Her Holy

Sword Artes, honed through constant training, did not allow even an ounce of evil to exist. She ruthlessly tries to harvest lives according to God's will. In terms of ability, it was an attack on par with a High Paladin's. If she were up against a normal spawn of evil, her blow would've ended everything before her opponent knew what hit them.

Yes, if only she were up against a normal spawn of evil. Unfortunately for her, she was facing someone who strode right past normal in more than a few dozen ways.

...It's also true that the sudden appearance of an enemy shook her. And it was also a fact that her inner turmoil clouded the sword she drew at the speed of light.

Still...

"Nuuuuuuuuuuoooooooooooo! Emergency Evasion!"

The man dodged Krähe's attack with strange, twisting movements that were almost inhuman—not even the supernatural could move like that. Krähe was momentarily stunned that her killing blow had missed its mark. But she didn't put everything into that one hit. Since her opponent lost his balance, she concentrated her strength to deliver the fatal blow on her return swing.

However...

"Stop! STOOOOOOP! Wait up, young lady! Halt! Cease! Puh-lease! Stop right there, fierce young lady!"

Her blade sliced the air. It's not that she missed, it's that she couldn't land a hit.

Krähe distanced herself from her opponent after her second full-strength attack missed. Even she didn't know whether she withdrew to better gauge his strength or to call for help. Whatever the case, she'd given this man called Vittorio a chance to speak.

"Hee, hee, haaa, haa, I'm fwagged... I've never screamed so loud my entire life," Vittorio panted out.

"Any last words?"

Krähe came across strong, but she was unsure how to deal with him. Her opponent had named himself a member of Mynoghra, the nation ruled by the King of Ruin, who'd devastated Amrita and its surroundings. And in support of his own words, the evil aura that oozed from him was too strong and bone-chilling for him to classify as a mere scout or vanguard. Krähe found it hard to believe that Mynoghra's evil had reached this city, but she couldn't refute that they had already taken possession of several towns and villages while she had her hands tied here.

In other words, their encounter was inevitable.

But she never expected she'd be forced to fight for her life in a place like this before she even had the chance to mentally prepare herself. Krähe's breaths came fast and shallow from nervousness as she worried about Nerim back at base camp.

However, contrary to her fighting resolve, the situation unfolded in a different direction.

"I surrender! Waving the white flag here! Have mercy! Please show me overwhelming merccccccccccy!!"

The man—her would-be enemy, Vittorio, suddenly threw himself down on the ground, prostrating before her as he begged for mercy. It would be easy to cleave his head from his body with her sword as he desperately pressed it to the dirty ground. Though she faced the spawn of evil, she erupted with anger and confusion at his pathetic display.

"Hogwash!"

She didn't know what else to shout. She'd never seen someone take such a bizarre course of action before. It'd be a tad harsh to chalk her reaction up to a lack of experience. After all, her opponent was the Gleeful Spin Doctor—the master of wheedling and undermining through nonsense.

"I surrender! I shan't run nor hide! I'll let you tie me up! I'll go peacefully, so please, let me talk it out with you fair and squaaaaare!"

"...Huh?" Krähe squeaked in a high-pitched voice. She was incapable of any other reply. Her mind blanked because she never expected him to say that.

If her opponent was putting on this charade to get an opening in her defenses, then Krähe would've been dead as a nail right then. But that's not what happened. For of all the misfortunes to befall someone, she had to have Vittorio as her opponent...

"I'm anti-violence, you see?"

Vittorio grinned as carefree as can be. Krähe froze stiffer than a statue on the receiving end of Vittorio's overly eager and innocent gaze. While she was rendered speechless, Vittorio took that opportunity to advocate his case, seemingly used to people reacting like she had.

"You will accept my surrender, won't you? According to your religious teachings, God values dialogue, not violence!"

All reason told her to take up her sword.

Her heart screamed at her to cut down evil.

The faith within her argued she shouldn't listen to this man's words.

But...

"The Teachings of the Holy God Arlos, chapter 4, verse 4 of the second great book: 'The Holy God has gathered the people and said thus: avoid violence

and do not point your blade at those who have chosen to surrender. Even if they are a sinner.’ In other words, this law established by the Holy God Arlos forbids his believers from harming those who surrender.”

Aaah, the spawn of evil speaks of God’s law. Is there anything more hopeless than this?

“Am I wrong? Dame Krähe Imlerith of the Qualia Inquisitors?”

The hands of evil had already closed in around her before she could do anything about it.

Chapter 12: Menace

“**MMM**-mm-hmmmm hm~mm, mmmm hm~~mm~♪!”

An irritatingly jolly humming echoed off the walls. The type of humming that expressed oh-how-very-excited the singer was for what was about to come. You could search all throughout the vast, wide world and not find anyone humming as happily as this. The greatest flaw in this little performance was the tone-deaf tune and that the singer—Vittorio—was bound hand and foot.

“Hey! Hello, Mynoghra to Archlector Idiot!” an angry voice called out beside him. The voice belonged to the Lector of the Cult of Ira, Yona’Yona. The simplest way to explain her current predicament was to call her the sad little girl who found herself unwittingly tied up with Vittorio.

“Hm~mmm-mm. Hm-hmm-nnn! Fa-lalala-la-laaaaaaaaa!!”

His godawful humming continued. She wished she could shove her sock in his mouth or strangle him with it. Unfortunately, Vittorio and Yona’Yona weren’t alone. They were in the former headquarters of the Southern Province Order of Paladins, surrounded by several of Qualia’s Paladins and Soldiers. The great hall, which formerly served as a dining hall and the Paladin headquarters when the Divine Nation of Lenea was founded, now served as a prison for Vittorio and Yona’Yona. They were tied to a pillar in the center of the hall, spending their time as prisoners of war under the unrelenting, sharp gazes of the holy soldiers.

“Oi, Archlector Idiot! I’m talkin’ to ya here!”

Then again, Yona’Yona might’ve been the only one who viewed them as prisoners. Vittorio had been humming that terrible tune for a while now, leaving only Yona’Yona to panic since she got captured when she answered the Gleeful Spin Doctor’s summons.

“Listen to me, you idiot!!”

Perhaps she just couldn’t stand the irate glares coming from the Paladins or felt bad for forcing them to listen to her mentor’s singing that was on par with nails on a chalkboard—whatever motivated her, Yona’Yona deftly twisted her restrained body to thrust the horns on top of her head right into Vittorio.

His unsettling performance ended abruptly and a blood-curdling scream took its place.

“Yowzerrrrssss! How uncouth of you to raise your voice like that, young

lady! You're being disrespectful to the Qualiaaaaans who ever-so-kindly prepared this venue for us to talk. Now you've gone and ruined this peaceful moment! And you ruined moi's beautiful face!"

"Shut the hell up, clown! Put a sock in it! You're pissing off our hosts!"

"Silent mode, activated!"

An eerie silence fell over the spacious great hall.

Seeming happy with the newfound silence, Krähe and the Lenea Investigation Squad began to discuss things a short distance away, keeping one eye trained on the pitiful captives. They never fully took their eyes off the pair, carefully watching to see if they made any funny moves.

"...Hey, Archlector Idiot. Why are we still in one piece? Don't bad things usually happen when you get caught like this?" Yona'Yona asked in a whisper, curious why the Paladins only seemed to talk amongst themselves without laying a hand on them.

Vittorio appeared quite contented by getting to hum his little ditty for so long, since he actually answered Yona'Yona's questions for once.

"Why, it's simple, ma tigresse! According to their teachings, they aren't allowed to lay a finger upon those who have surrendered! THUS, they will not inflict violence upon we who've surrendered! *Je capitule, Seigneur!* What a wonderful anti-violence stance! Praise be to pacifism! This is the clever method moi came up with to compensate for my lack of fighting prowess!"

Qualia worshipped the Holy God Arlos, and they held up the teachings in his Holy Books as law. Of course, they had practical laws and regulations in place to operate as a nation, but they were all based on the teachings in the Holy Books. Consequently, anyone from Qualia prioritized abiding by those teachings first and foremost. Even if they were up against the spawn of evil or someone using their holy teachings against them for malicious reasons, they could never act in opposition to those teachings since it would damage their very identity as followers of Arlos.

Vittorio was as calm as a cucumber because he knew that. He spared no effort to ensnare his enemies. When did he get the time to procure Qualia's Holy Books and read them from cover to cover? He had studied them enough to understand what he needed to pull off this scheme.

But the forces of good weren't just going to roll over and take it.

Krähe came marching up to them, seeming to have overheard Vittorio's not-so-quiet explanation. His voice had an obnoxious way of traveling even when he supposedly suppressed it.

"Enough games, spawn of evil," she spat. "It doesn't matter how much you hem and haw your way out of things here, you will receive official punishment

soon. It's only a matter of when you will die—not if.”

She spoke the truth. The Holy Books forbade attacking someone who surrenders, but only temporarily. If Central later passes judgment based on the holy laws, it would become just punishment and the law of God. And Central had nothing but death in store for evil.

But Vittorio was more than well aware of that. He let out the loudest, longest sigh at Krähe's remark, then launched into a scathing, belittling lecture like he was instructing a young child who just didn't get it.

“Oh me, oh my! Is that really, truly, surely all right with you? I came here with an excellent deal! It's a special deal, you know? I'll even give you bonus points! Oh, would you like a member's card?”

“What a load of crock... We would never accept a deal with the spawn of evil—”

“VITTO-RI-OOOO!!” Vittorio suddenly shouted. His voice was so loud it caused the ground to tremor slightly, and even the Paladins watching over them from afar grimaced.

“...What?” Krähe asked, feeling a little sorry for Yona'Yona, whose eyes were spinning because she was sitting right next to Vittorio and had received the worst of his shout. Krähe hated taking his bait, but she felt like they wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't.

“Please call me Vittorio when you speak to me. If you don't respect my request, I'll start calling you Pretty Kitty!”

“There's no reason for me to remember your name,” she demurred. “There's no value in uttering or remembering the spawn of evil's name.”

“Pretty Kittyyyyyyy!!”

“You can't provoke me into—”

“Meow, meow, meeoow! Pretty Bitty Little Kitty!!”

Krähe's cheeks flushed crimson, perhaps out of offense at his insult or sheer embarrassment. Either way, she didn't know how to deal with this man who never listened and arbitrarily argued to have his way. Getting pulled into her opponent's games was dangerous, but leaving him to his own devices was even more dangerous.

Krähe had faced all sorts of crazies in her line of work. Due to their unique duties, Inquisitors often encountered people who'd had mental breakdowns and gone insane. Such people tended to live in their own little world, but the creature before her was leagues beyond any of them. What she especially couldn't stand about him was that she could tell he was going out of his way to act like this to get under her skin.

“Um, excuse me...” Yona'Yona spoke up, her rattled brain finally

recovered from his shouting.

Krähe shifted her gaze to the girl that somehow ended up apprehended with this cretin and urged her to speak. The man sitting beside her was so unhinged it was impossible to hold a conversation. As someone born in Qualia, Krähe felt discrimination toward Beastpeople, but she was grateful the goat girl was here.

“I’m seriously sorry ’bout this idiot here. He’s the type who won’t listen once he’s made up his mind about somethin’, so would you mind just calling him by name for now?”

“...Vittorio, was it?” Krähe said. “Fine. I’m showing you Arlos’s mercy, not compromise, by calling you by name.”

She had a horrible headache, but went along with him to keep things moving. She had given in to his request but didn’t want it to look like she had succumbed to evil over something like this. Krähe convinced herself she was doing the right thing by thinking she was helping the young girl being manipulated by him save face, so she grudgingly decided to start calling the man in front of her Vittorio.

“Mmm, goooooood! You have successfully landed yourself at the trading table, Inquisitor Imlerith!” Vittorio trumpeted.

“I already told you we don’t make deals with evil, Evil Spawn Vittorio. Our divine mission from God is to stop you from inciting the masses further and spreading your wicked purpose.”

“Mwahaha. Serious one, aren’t’cha? You should rule on my fate here and now, but you’re purposefully waiting for Qualia’s ruling? Looks like you’re the type who loves the stress of getting stuck between the people on the field and the higher-ups!” he goaded.

“.....”

Did she not want to debate him? Or did he hit the nail on the head? Either way, Krähe fell silent.

Yona’Yona was the first to break the brief silence. She was going to take this opportunity to get a word in edgewise.

“We aren’t gettin’ anywhere like this, so I’ll introduce us in that moron’s place. We are denizens of Mynoghra, the nation ruled by the great and mighty King Takuto Ira. On top of that, we are followers of the Cult of Ira that worships our king as God. I’m the Lector, and this idiot is the Archlector. We’ve come to this land to proclaim the manifestation of a new god and spread our faith!”

“On paper, that is! That’s our front, ehe!” Vittorio interjected.

“...Shut your big fat trap, idiot!” Yona’Yona hissed.

Yona’Yona’s introduction caused a commotion, starting with the Paladins

watching over the proceedings. Were they surprised by the news? Krähe was taken completely by surprise to learn their opponent had started their own religion. Even though this was her first time learning about the existence of the Cult of Ira, her stance remained unchanged.

“This is land governed by Qualia,” Krähe stated. “No one, not one, is allowed to worship anything other than the Holy God Arlos. There isn’t an inch of room for evil to wheedle its way in.”

“Oh dear, isn’t this the Divine Nation of Lenea?” Vittorio asked. “A different country from Qualia, no? Isn’t it a tad strange for Qualia to lay claim to another nation?”

“Lenea is a nation that broke off from Qualia. A nation founded by Saints who abide by the same holy teachings under Arlos. It is only natural that Qualia extends a hand of support and protects them.”

“I’m not talking about feelings, but international politics, Inquisitor. Or do your holy teachings proclaim that it’s all right to take advantage of another country’s collapse, hm? Oh, and just to be clear, our country is all good with it!” he declared.

“We aren’t seeking your acceptance or understanding. Our holy will shall repel your wickedness from this land. That is the reality of it.”

“Well, that sounds about right,” Vittorio conceded.

He’d certainly hit where it hurts, but Krähe was used to a battle of wits on this level. Some of the many heretics and madmen she had judged tried to stir up controversy or get their way by starting arguments. It was the duty of an Inquisitor to confront such people head-on and destroy their fanciful theories once and for all. And so, Krähe swore to herself and Arlos that she wouldn’t reveal any weaknesses regarding the ownership of this territory.

But she was up against the Gleeful Spin Doctor. There was no guarantee his goal was to defeat his opponent in a battle of wits.

“And sooo, I’m here to make you a deal!”

As expected, Vittorio presented the same proposal again, as if rewinding them back to square one.

“That again? It’s not good to keep saying the same thing over and over again,” she chastised him. “We won’t accept any deal you bring to the table, but I will allow you to at least utter it.”

Not wanting to deal with another bout of his yelling, Krähe caved and allowed Vittorio to speak. Another concession.

“Why, my deal is to play a little game! Let’s all game! Does it not make sense when I put it like this? I want to have a contest with you. A fun, enjoyable bit of sport! What do you think? Doesn’t it sound exhilarating?”

“Sport? What kind of contest would we have with you at this point?” Krähe asked, incredulous. “Have you forgotten? We don’t make deals with evil. You will continue to wait for word from Central until you are punished by Arlos’s divine will.” Mustering her iron will, Krähe refused the Gleeful Spin Doctor’s invitation.

“The contents of the contest are simple,” Vittorio explained, completely ignoring her response as if it had no bearing on the conversation.

Krähe instinctively tried to stop him, but missed her chance as she got swept up in his momentum. Strangely enough, the Paladins experienced the same thing, and Vittorio launched into his explanation before anyone could interject.

“A contest for the religious hearts and minds of this city’s people. Let us use that to decide which of our gods is greater.”

The first emotion everyone, including Krähe, experienced was confusion. They thought he’d come up with a more sinister and unscrupulous proposal, but it was surprisingly reasonable. Of course, he’d only revealed the gist of the contest. Considering Vittorio’s past words and deeds, it was unlikely to end there. It wouldn’t be strange for this to be where his wicked mind reared its ugly nature.

Nervous tension ran through the holy forces. However...

“I’d love to say, ‘Anything goes,’ but I understand you wouldn’t be amendable to that, my good fellows. With that said, let’s prohibit acts of violence, brainwashing, and other unfair maneuvers. We also don’t wish for any harm to come to the people. It’ll be a perfectly acceptable case of mutual nonintervention!”

Vittorio’s proposal wasn’t all *that* dodgy and seemed to favor Qualia. It was impossible to claim there were no holes in it, but it appeared to be fair on the surface. Even so, using the sacred act of propagating the faith as fodder for a contest didn’t sit well with Qualia’s people...

“Why should we even believe you? Why should we partake in a contest with you? You should come to terms with your situation, Evil Spawn Vittorio,” Krähe coolly shot down his proposal.

Although she’d allowed him to speak in the heat of the moment, she had no intention of considering Vittorio’s deal from the get-go. Besides, she had every suspicion that the rules he vowed to protect would be broken the second the situation called for it.

And yet, for all of that, the spawn of evil continued to elude their questions with half-truths, further ensnaring the forces of good with only his words.

“Please don’t misunderstand—this is a concession,” Vittorio stated. “You

have everyyyy right to refuse, of course, but you must accept that the result of your refusal is your own choice. I'm merely making the proposal. It's your job to make the decisions and produce results!"

Threatening language and blackmail are common tricks used by the forces of evil. There normally wasn't any room to give their venomous words a second thought. All Qualia had to do was quietly proceed with the usual procedures and erase this windbag from the face of the planet in Arlos's holy name.

However...

"Or perhapsss, it's a tall order for a mere investigation squad to save everyone?"

No matter how strong their will and holy ambition was, they couldn't deny his next query. This was the first full truth Vittorio had uttered. The Lenea Investigation Squad lacked the numbers to do all they set out to do. And their small squad was already tied up trying to aid people.

It'd be easy to turn down evil's invitation. Any follower of the Holy God Arlos had the willpower to do so. But what about dealing with the resulting tragedy?

They didn't even need to think twice about what the King of Ruin would do if he lost this man who claimed to be the Archlector of the Cult of Ira. They had no guarantee reinforcements from Central would make it in time. Worse, they had no guarantee reinforcements would even be sent.

Inviting another disaster to Amrita seemed cruel when it was finally showing signs of recovery...

They needed to buy time. At least enough time to deal with the coming disaster.

The argument gave way to silence, halting their conversation.

Perhaps he was irritated by Krähe's indecisiveness or anticipated it because Vittorio's crooked face broke into a leering smile that incited the desire to puke. "Aw, fine! I'll give up my big secret! What we want is people and land! That's why we're making such concessions! It's easier to get what we want without conflict!!!"

Krähe was torn over what to do.

It was well-known that the southern part of Idoragya, where Mynoghra was located, was a barren land. The Accursed Lands the Mynoghrans called home was considered even more inhospitable than the rest. It was a persuasive argument then that they would target the abundant, fertile land belonging to Lenea. As for people, if they could really brainwash others into believing in Ira from the bottom of their hearts, it would be beneficial to them in various ways.

Considering what Qualia already knew of the happenings in the El-Nah

Alliance of Elementals, one of the goals of the forces of evil seemed to be increasing their military strength through others. If true, then at least the citizens would live. Granted, there are some fates worse than death...

Krähe and the investigation squad had no information on how the believers of Arlos were treated once they fell into Mynoghra's hands. There was nothing they could do with information they did not have.

Krähe continued to hesitate, and before she realized it, her gaze shifted to Yona'Yona for help.

"Uh, yeah, he's not lying," Yona'Yona said. "That's our goal, all right. You lot might see us as little more than cold-blooded, malicious monsters, but that's not the case. Even we laugh and cry. We're just as happy not to let things get messy, you know? Well, this creep here is one giant walking mess, but what's a girl to do?"

If this girl says so, does that make it true? At the very least, she looks more sincere than Vittorio and like she's got her hands full with him, Krähe thought.

This conversation helped Krähe get a general gist of her opponent's intentions. Since the King of Ruin wasn't taking direct action, it might be safe to assume they had a grace period. Besides, the Divine Nation of Lenea was destroyed by the King of Ruin's attack. And it was the two Saints—Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and The Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair—targeting the King of Ruin that brought about his counterattack in the first place.

If this whole tragedy was caused by provoking the King of Ruin—who'd kept to himself in the Accursed Lands—then it was hard to decry their pacifist means as an outright trap.

Before she knew it, Krähe was sorting the information in the most convenient way for her. And no one pointed it out. Then again, even if they had pointed it out, nothing would come of it...

Finally, Krähe made her decision.

"Do you vow to keep your earlier promise and not interfere with us?"

She decided to accept the devil's deal.

A member of a good empire was making a deal with a member of an evil empire. She had just committed an act in direct violation of the Holy God Arlos's teachings.

"Inquisitor Imlerith!"

The Paladins raised their voices in protest. They criticized her for losing her mind, not realizing they had no alternative to offer.

"I will take responsibility," Krähe declared. "We need to buy time."

"B-But...!!"

It's always easier for the people who don't have to take responsibility. It's

even easier for those who only criticize without offering alternatives.

Krähe felt the need to persuade the Paladins to understand the situation correctly. But indecision is fatal in these situations. And the fatality would not befall them, but the citizens.

“I know you must be worried, so I’ll keep an eye on this moron to keep him from doing anything unfair,” Yona’Yona said, offering encouraging words to support Krähe’s decision. “I swear upon the name of our great Lord Takuto Ira, as the Lector of the Cult of Ira. So please rest assured in this: the Cult of Ira is making this concession in good faith. I won’t let this nutjob lay a hand on you, no matter what he’s schemin’.”

Yona’Yona’s helping hand always offered what Krähe wanted, when she wanted it. While she silently thanked the girl for her sincerity, Krähe finally made a declaration that would become a major turning point in her life.

“So be it. Arlos’s believers will never fall to evil. We accept your challenge.”

“Mm, very good!” Vittorio chirped. “I can say with full confidence that you just made the right decision, Inquisitor Imlerith.”

Was that truly the right decision? Will my attempt at buying time end up bringing forth a far worse result? The worries Krähe couldn’t wash off turned to sludge and ate away at her, but even so, she couldn’t have made a different choice. Her thoughts suddenly turned to the kind girl who chased after her father’s shadow, journal in hand.

“Now then!” Vittorio announced.

“Whoa!!”

A gust of wind rushed upon them and Vittorio rose. The Paladins hastily drew their swords, but Vittorio already had Yona’Yona tucked under his arm and his feet on the windowsill.

It’d be a lie to say they hadn’t been wary, but they had let their guard down.

This wicked man could’ve fled at any time. The whole thing was an act from the beginning—he pretended to get caught just to make this deal.

“I bid you farewell! Until we meet again! Adieu~~!!”

The jester’s grating laughter disappeared out the window.

Krähe was strangely relieved that Vittorio hadn’t forgotten to take Yona’Yona with him, her expression darkening as she imagined the harrowing days ahead.

“Inquisitor Imlerith.”

The Paladins all looked to her, concern and confusion plain on their faces. Convincing them came first. If she didn’t, she’d lose the precious time she’d

bought for them with her life on the line.

“You better have a good reason for this,” they demanded.

Krähe had a long fight ahead of her.

Chapter 13: Cachinnation

THE matter of being taken in by Vittorio—by the spawn of evil’s honeyed words was shelved for the time being. The Paladins understood the predicament. Understood what fate would befall the city if Krähe Imlerith hadn’t accepted his proposal. That was why they decided to put judging her decision on hold and prioritized their holy duty to keep the masses safe first.

But it was undeniable that Krähe had violated Arlos’s sacred teachings. A certain kind of tension formed between them precisely because the Paladins were such devout believers of Arlos, and they struggled to process their feelings of powerlessness and betrayal over Krähe’s arbitrary decision.

A slight crack formed in the bonds that existed between Krähe Imlerith and the investigation squad.

“This is bad news...”

In her private quarters within the former Southern Province Order of Paladin Headquarters, Krähe calmly analyzed the situation. However, no matter how much she calculated and scrutinized the information, she and Saint Lytrain were in a terrible situation.

The Paladins are uncooperative. Worse, they doubt me... Krähe lamented.

The Paladins had their opinions and wanted to hold to them. Their attitudes had changed dramatically since the Vittorio incident. Naturally, none of them were childish enough to make their grievances public. The fact no one had come forward criticizing or denouncing Krähe instead of doing their job was proof of that.

Even so, the rift between them was gradually growing further apart.

I thought I made a rational decision to save the people, but they must have taken that as me making concessions for the spawn of evil. I can no longer enforce things using my position as a shield.

Krähe could wield such authority and sway until now solely due to her position as the Scribe Saint’s representative. This was further supported by the fear and reverence everyone held for the Inquisitors. But her authority had dropped like a rock. Her status came from Lytrain’s trust and Central’s command. But it wasn’t as effective now that the Paladins no longer trusted her.

That showed how sullied her standing had become by making a deal with the devil in a clown outfit.

No, I should stop glossing over it, she told herself. I unquestionably compromised with the spawn of evil. Nerim was bound to get hurt if I let things go on like that. I just couldn't...shake the fear of that happening.

The power of Saint Lytrain's journal was inimitable. She could perform all sorts of miracles as long as she was willing to sacrifice her memories. But the journal's wielder was nothing but a poor, unfortunate child. Unlike Krähe, she was a novice when it came to combat. With the Paladins and Soldiers having their hands full elsewhere, Saint Lytrain was a sitting duck.

Krähe was both clergy and warrior. She represented Arlos's will and protected people everywhere. But she was also Lytrain's friend. The girl might've forgotten about their friendship, but Krähe would never forget. And Krähe wasn't so coldblooded that she could sacrifice her dear little friend for the greater good.

Even if that meant...sacrificing everything else to protect her.

Krähe would never, ever forsake Lytrain.

O Lord, my god... What should your humble servant do?

She had prayed to Arlos more times than she could ever recount. The holy scriptures were so stuck in her mind, it was hard to get them wrong. The sacred rituals she'd performed in His name numbered more than the stars in the sky.

But her—their—situation didn't improve.

"O Lord... Why don't you help us?"

Just as she uttered words of doubt she shouldn't have, there was a slight noise in the room. Krähe perked up and spun around in surprise. After a long moment, the door where the noise had come from slowly opened, and Lytrain popped her timid face into the room.

"Um... Inquisitor Imlerith?"

"Oh, hello there, Nerim. How are you feeling?"

Krähe schooled her features into a smile. Did her awkward attempt get through to the little girl? Her heart thundered in her ears as her mind raced with worry that her young friend had overheard her questioning God. This was the first time she was ever grateful for the miracle that was Lytrain's complete memory loss. This dark secret too...would soon be erased from her innocent mind.

Then again, it seemed she was worried for nothing, since Lytrain tilted her head at her curiously.

"...? I'm well?"

"Is that so? You have been pushing yourself of late, so I was a bit worried."

"Have I?" Lytrain shuffled into the room.

Krähe urged Lytrain to take a seat and knelt before her so she could speak to her at eye level. Lytrain's perfectly round, glasslike eyes stared at Krähe, making her feel like she'd get sucked into their clear depths. Then Krähe slowly confided her feelings to the Scribe Saint.

"Your power is...a precious gift granted to you by God. It is powerful enough to heal people, restore their faith, and ward off evil. However, it requires your memories in return."

Even the most temporary of memories that we all forget in time anyway... All of them were taken, over and over and over again.

"I don't want you to bear this burden any further..."

"Father told me: 'If you keep doing good deeds, good things will happen.' That again.

Every time she asked, she received the same answer. And sadly enough, Lytrain most likely forgot even that repeated dialogue. But Krähe listened to her story as if it were her first time hearing it.

"Um... I promised to live with my father again. That's why I have to keep doing my very best, so I can live with him soon. I need to do as many good deeds as I can."

The chances of High Paladin Verdel being alive were dismal. The circumstances made his fate as clear as day, especially given the irrefutable fact no one had returned from investigating the Accursed Lands.

Lytrain didn't know that her father went on a mission to investigate the Accursed Lands. She also wasn't privy to the fact he hadn't returned from there or that they had lost all contact with him. And that was why she continued being driven by her desire to be with her father again.

"Yes, it will be all right. I just know you will be able to live with your dear father again. Because you have done so many good deeds, Nerim..."

Krähe was disgusted by her own cowardice.

Should such a foolish person be allowed to exist in this world? Instead of facing the one and only dream this girl held, she was a spineless coward who closed her eyes to reality and refused to tell the truth.

Aaah, why won't anyone save her? Krähe repined. Why isn't there a way for everyone to be happy? A future where she can live with her father?

"How would you like to actually live with you dear father agaiiiin?"

Someone suddenly interrupted their conversation.

Krähe quickly stood before Lytrain, casting a deadly glare at the speaker—the spawn of evil who hailed from Mynoghra—Vittorio. How long had he been

there? He was thoughtfully rubbing his chin with one hand, his usual skin-crawling sneer plastered on his lips and his unrepentant gaze eating them up.

“Nerim...stay behind me,” Krähe said in a dark voice. “Evil Spawn Vittorio, what are you thinking? You agreed we would not interfere with each other just the other day. Are you already breaking your promise?”

“Non, non. My visit this time falls under the umbrella of a mere discussion! It shan’t influence our little game!”

“Lies. Do you think I’ll be satisfied if you just reword things to suit your needs? What does your Lector think of this?”

“Well, y’see, I came without telling sweet little Yona’Yona. She’d beat the living daylight out of me if she knew...”

“I like the sound of that. I propose that she becomes the one and true Archlector.”

“Mwahaha. I wholeheartedly agreeeee.”

It appeared the young Lector—Yona’Yona—wasn’t with him. If Vittorio was to be believed, he’d come without consulting her, and given what Krähe knew of the girl’s earnest personality, that seemed likely. Then there was no leash for this crafty man—proof he was free to do whatever the hell he wanted with no one to stop him.

“Does that mean you wish to be on the receiving end of my Holy Sword Artes?”

Krähe glanced at a spot a short distance away. As she was relaxing in her own quarters, she’d left her equipment hanging on the far corner of the wall. Threatening him with her sword sounded cool and all, but it was a long shot if she’d actually be able to get the jump on him to pull it off.

But Krähe had to try. She’d vowed she was willing to make any sacrifice to protect the trembling girl behind her.

However, the unexpected that should be expected by this point had happened.

“Non, non! We use words, not swords! I only came here to make a proposal!!”

The man wanted to bargain with words again. In other words, he had yet another deal to strike. More evil temptations. More taboo words to invite people to their ruin.

“A proposal? Again? What in the realm do you—”

“Inquisitor Imlerith,” Vittorio cut her off before she could finish. “Would you be interested in taking that fair young lady and joining our side?”

His invitation caused both Krähe and Lytrain to gape at him. Krähe glared at him with all the anger bubbling up inside her at his ridiculous offer.

“Are you daft...?”

Changing sides is the art of war. In disputes between nations, this is done through mediation. Qualia had long been a peaceful nation free from war, but such acts had been recorded in the annals of history and even been observed during small-scale skirmishes. The reasons someone might commit apostasy and become a turncoat are as multifarious as the situations they find themselves in at the time.

But what Krähe knew for sure was that she and Lytrain had enough value to the enemy to make this proposal. Krähe shook off her desire to know his intentions and flatly rejected his offer.

“I refuse.”

“Oh my Saints!” Vittorio gasped. “Whyever would you?”

“It’s not even a question of why,” she responded tersely. “I played along with your little games once, but that was only because it was the most peaceful option. Your offer this time shows clear contempt for our nation. And let’s pretend that wasn’t the case—why would you think we would ever submit to evil?”

“But if you doooooon’t, he’ll never come back to life, will he?” Vittorio pointed out. “And here I was, all ready and rearing to ask my great and mighty God to bring him back from the dead if Imlerith flashed me a double peace sign and said, ‘I’ll succumb to eeeee-vl, ehe!’”

Krähe sucked in a sharp breath between her teeth. “St-Stop that. How dare you try to deceive people with such heresy. You can’t bring someone back from the dead. That is why everyone always reflects on their actions and does their best to live without regrets. Besides—his death is your fault!”

Krähe knew what Vittorio was alluding to without him having to say more. And she was furious about it. *Just how much must this spawn of evil make a mockery of people before he’s satisfied?* she seethed. *How dare he even try to use the greatest desire of an innocent little girl in his wicked plot.*

“It’s not moi’s fault, you know? The fault lies with the Under Paladin accompanying him who went and did something unnecessarily foolish. He was supposed to return home safe and sound. But that young welp of a Paladin became so blinded by his biases, he made the wrong decision. Karma sure is a bitch for Paladins when they have to pay for their allies’ mistakes with their lives. My condolences!”

“Grrr!”

It was strange. The High Paladin Verdel that Krähe knew was a calm and collected man who never picked a fight he couldn’t win. He quite honestly played a little fast and loose with Arlos’s Holy Teachings, but that gave him

flexibility and adaptability, and he achieved results that exceeded his orders. He could decide to beat a quick retreat if he sensed danger, and he was better than anyone else at assessing a situation. Krähe found it more than a little strange that such a man would never be heard from again, but it made sense if Vittorio was telling the truth.

But if that was the truth, then it'd extinguish the sliver of hope Krähe was holding on to. Someone who called the Accursed Lands home spoke of the fate of a scout who'd gone missing after being sent to said Accursed Lands. There was no proof more despairing and concrete than this...

That's why... Aaah, that's why...

"Um, pardon me, what are you talking about?" Lytrain asked.

I didn't want her to hear this news.

Krähe hesitated. She debated how to trick her young friend. Wondered what lies she could come up with to get them out of this situation.

"Dear, little, pitiful Scribe Girlie. Your daddy is dead, you know?" Vittorio simply told it like it was, shattering Krähe's hopes to smooth things over.

"...What?" Lytrain asked, dumbfounded.

"L-Lies! He's lying! You mustn't listen to him, Nerim!" Krähe shouted. But her words rang hollow.

"You of all people, *mon p'tit chaton*, know in your heart and soul that I am not lying. High Paladin Verdel ran straight into our territory while investigating the Accursed Lands. He lost his life in the ensuing conflict. No contact, no visual, means no way he's aaaalive!" The jester belted out a blissfully delighted deriding laugh.

While Krähe was fumbling for a counterargument, Nerim boldly stepped out from behind her, large, crystalline tears rolling down her pale cheeks.

"But, but! I met with Father!" she cried. "He told me he would come to see me again when he's less busy! That he'd tell me everything then!"

"Oh, that was an imposter, *ma poupée*. To be specific, it was our God mimicking him. Sounds like you had a heartwarming reunion with an imposter! Poor, poor *poupée*!"

"Y-You're lying... It can't... No..." Lytrain gasped out between sobs.

"Aw, shucks! Even I took a hit to the feelers on that one! Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news! But it had to be said! Looks like everyone kept it a secret from you! That's why I took up the mantle to tell you, *ma poupée*!"

Tears poured like a river from Lytrain's big, round eyes.

Krähe didn't even notice her own vision blurring as she watched her young friend tremble and weep. *Aah, Lord, is it truly all right for the spawn of evil to cause such suffering in others? Even without the use of scorching flames, evil*

curses, vicious claws, or heinous weapons, is it all right for mere words to inflict such harm upon one's soul?

Krähe lost the will to argue. She realized she'd already reached the point of no return. It was all over a long, long time ago—long before Vittorio ever did anything. That truth was made evident.

“But...but! Good things will surely happen if you keep doing good deeds...”

The Scribe Saint's heart shattered like glass. The one and only thing she held on to for dear life to keep her sense of self—her memories with her father—and the pure, unadulterated wish that helped her stand up against the miseries of reality.

If you keep doing good deeds, good things will happen.

The words of hope her father gave her ...

“Has anything good happened thus far?” Vittorio asked.

All of it was reduced to ash right then and there.

“No... No...”

“Now, now, don't cry your heart out, ma poupée. Life is full of twists and turns! Your dreams will come true as long as you never give up! Come on, stand up. Stand strong. I've come bearing especially good news for moi's poor, poor poupée. So, will you hear me out?”

The spawn of evil's wicked words tore Lytrain apart, piece by piece. The heart-wrenching end to the girl's dream—the one she believed would surely come true one day—came in the worst possible way.

Krähe became dominated by anger, forgetting all about the reason and teachings keeping her good-aligned.

“Enough. Your words reek of rot. Don't utter another word. I made a mistake. To think going along with the devil's smooth talk would bring about such utterly repulsive results. I'll cut you down and end all of this here.”

Unprecedented hatred filled her whole being. Her sword was farther than she'd like, but it didn't matter. She was seething with such dark emotions that made her want to cut down the man in front of her this instant, that it chased away her holy mindset and rationale.

“No, I will utter another word,” Vittorio said. “And lower those fists! For I've come bearing the one and only means to repair this tragedy!”

Nonsense. Krähe couldn't fathom how the man in front of her believed in his delusion that she would hear him out after he'd insulted them. But it mattered not what he thought or wanted. There was but one thing for her to do now—punching his lights out and taking that opening to grab her Holy Sword and silence his filthy mouth for all eternity.

However...

What the? I can't move!

It was almost as if an invisible force was compelling her to hear him out because Krähe remained dead silent despite her fervent desire to impale him with her sword.

“Right then, to the deal! Here’s my proposal! Join our side! Simple, right? You see, even I’m sympathetic to the young lady’s plight. I’d like to do whatever I can for her. I mean, when you think about it, isn’t it super offensive? The whole situation is heartless, really.”

Move, move, move, damn it! She yelled at herself to take action. She struggled and fought internally, but her body wouldn’t even utter a single word.

“And soooo! I’m gonna save you all! Yay! It’s a happy ending!”

Don’t listen to him. If you do, your heart will be swayed. If you do, you’ll accept his damn offer!

Vittorio’s honeyed words turned to poison and ate away at Krähe.

“Evil shouldn’t pity people? Nonsense!” Vittorio exclaimed. “An evil person is free to do whatever they please! Meaning we are also free to show pity to a holy Saint who stands against us! We’re not like you do-gooders who are tied inflexibly to justice!”

“Whatever you say, we won’t succumb to you! Your honeyed words won’t reach us!” Krähe shouted. “Accepting a deal from the devil is the same as embarking down the road to ruin. I understand that all too well now. You forced that understanding upon me!”

“Hmmm,” Vittorio hummed to himself. “Another of the holy god’s teachings. What an admirable thing for a do-nothing god to teach, ha...”

Krähe gasped for air. She’d mustered all her strength to shout back at Vittorio and it utterly exhausted her. But it seemed Vittorio hadn’t expected her to rebel, because he snorted at her with disinterest. Like his toy lost its shininess.

Maybe I avoided falling for evil’s temptation this time... Relief enveloped Krähe like a warm blanket.

“Well, all right then,” Vittorio relented. “I’ll return home with my tail between my legs this time. It’s almost time for supper, after all.”

He’s leaving again? Krähe didn’t have the energy to chase after him. But it was fortunate her opponent decided to retreat. *Perhaps he’s not a fighter?* Krähe speculated but didn’t have time to linger on such thoughts. She tracked Vittorio’s back as he strolled toward the door with a hop in his step. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to escape this miserable situation.

“Oh, one last thing, Inquisitor Imlerith!” Vittorio said just as his hand opened the door to leave. “Do you truly understand why they say the deals evil

offers are so terrifying?”

“.....”

It was a strange question.

Krähe answered him with silence, but she had no idea what incited him to ask it. Deals with the spawn of evil were frightening because one's own ruin awaited on the other side. That was the way of the world and Arlos's teaching. What in the realm was he trying to convey by reaffirming that universal law?

“Because it's all real,” Vittorio said.

“...What?”

Krähe was confused by his short reply. But his next words made her deeply regret letting him continue to talk.

“Eternal beauty, femme fatale, limitless intelligence, unparalleled power—and reuniting with dead loved ones. In every country and every age, the gifts evil bestows are all real. Of course, there's no trap behind it. Eternal beauty never fades. The femme fatale continues to smile away at you, intelligence and power only increase. And the resurrected don't become ash and bone. That is the reason why evil's deals attract people like flies to honey.”

The jester continued his temptation. Every word he uttered was sweeter than the last and aroused great interest.

“You seem to believe ruin awaits you if you accept my offer. That it must be some kind of trap. That you will waste away in eternal suffering and regret.”

He was absolutely right. She had been taught as much and believed it to this day. And she wished with all her heart that it was true.

“I swear that will never happen. All that awaits she who bows before my god is eternal happiness and peace. Peaceful days with your dear friend, who will regain her smile. A life with three meals a day and no overtime. And at the end of the story, is the promised happily ever after. That is exactly what our God Takuto Ira will grant you.”

The devil's sweet, sweet invitation ensnared Krähe and Lytrain.

“I look forward to your choice, ladies!”

A loud, earsplitting laugh that seemed to mock the world rang out, followed by dead silence. All that was left in his wake was the freezing cold and dark, dark feelings of despair. And the two pitiful girls who had to cope with it.

“Inquisitor Imlerith... Miss Krähe...”

“Y-Yes...?!”

“Was what that man said...true?”

“...I'm sorry, Nerim.”

“Father's no longer...”

“I'm sorry. I am so, so, so sorry...”

Both girls pulled each other into a hug and silently wept, as if that would console the other.

Chapter 14: Surrender

SEVERAL days had passed since Vittorio carried out his grievous subterfuge during the crepuscular hours. Krähe remained calm on the surface. Their situation in Amrita was as bad as ever, and they continued to use Scribe Saint Lytrain's powers to save people. However, the contest proposed and implemented by Vittorio and his Cult of Ira had netted overwhelmingly negative results for the forces of good.

"The situation in Amrita is beyond what we can handle."

"Ninety percent of the population has converted to the foul Cult of Ira and abandoned Arlos."

"Oh, Arlos, how did it come to this..."

They were holding a meeting in the command post tent. Not long ago, the area outside used to be crowded with people seeking treatment and instruction from Arlos's holy teachings. Now the hustle and bustle were replaced with such silence, it made one doubt the commotion of the past.

It goes without saying the holy forces weren't just resting on their laurels. The Paladins and followers of Arlos had steadfastly preached the good word about Arlos, spreading the faith. More than a few clergy set out with Nerim to treat the sick. Even an objective third party could look at the situation and determine they had gone above and beyond the call.

But the Cult of Ira was faster.

For every ten people they edified with Arlos's teachings, the Cult reached one hundred. For every ten people they treated, the Cult cured a thousand. It was anyone's guess what wicked methods the Cult employed, but they were definitely saving the sick and the saved became open believers in the Cult of Ira's doctrines. Even the people Qualia had put significant time and effort into helping remember their faith were easily won over by the Cult. Cleric Cayman and other competent personnel necessary to rebuild Amrita had willingly left Qualia's camp for the Cult of Ira.

Defeat was inevitable.

At least they were able to help some citizens escape to the north.

No one who converted to the Cult of Ira was mistreated, neither in Amrita nor elsewhere in the Southern Province. As far as that point was concerned, Vittorio—or most likely, Lector Yona'Yona—kept their word.

No one was suffering. The situation was as bad as it could be for them, but Krähe found a sliver of hope in the people's well-being. However, the Paladins didn't share the sentiment. If anything, they put their hopes in something else entirely.

"We have no choice but to rely on the Scribe Saint now."

"That's a bad idea..." Krähe jumped to her feet and argued against the Paladin's alarming suggestion. "Nerim— Saint Nerim's power is too devastating on her person. There's no telling what horrible things will happen to her if she seeks a miracle capable of overturning our predicament!"

Krähe thought they would end up adopting a plan to abandon Amrita. Given the circumstances, she believed the Paladins would understand and return to Central to bolster their forces with the Mystic Saint. She painfully learned that her thinking was naïve.

"Inquisitor Imlerith, we have reason to question your stance on evil," a Paladin challenged. "Do not be spineless in the face of evil. Inquisitors aren't meant to throw their weight around just to protect their loved ones, are they?"

"I must agree with him completely," another joined in. "I must say that your response toward evil on this occasion is too weak-kneed. God's trials are oft heavy and painful. But they can always be overcome. We understand that is why the Saint has been sent to this land."

Krähe was in shock. She never imagined the Paladins would be so obsessed with dealing with evil that they would let it warp their minds and souls to this extent. What good did it do for those who had remained silent during meetings and hadn't offered any concrete measures before to suddenly talk big? They weren't even offering to do anything about it themselves, but instead wanted to put all the burden on another.

Krähe had been trying to show them due respect, given the sticky spot she'd put herself into with how she handled Vittorio, but she couldn't remain silent any longer. She wouldn't stand for them sacrificing Lytrain.

"You want to rely on Saint Nerim's power just because you are incapable of doing anything yourselves?" she impugned. "You want to push all the responsibility upon a young girl, and you *dare* call yourselves Paladins?"

"It's because we call ourselves Paladins that we sometimes have to make ironhearted decisions." The Paladin turned from Krähe to address the others. "It appears Inquisitor Imlerith is tired. She needs to take a break. We will handle the rest of the meeting, so you may rest now."

Krähe looked around the tent. Angry and suspicious looks fleeced her from every corner. She had nothing to say to these men who reacted in the same heated manner, as if they'd caught the same virus. She understood she had

become a target for criticism, but she never thought their respect for her had dropped beyond repair.

No one would take her side.

“...Very well. I’ll excuse myself for now.”

True to her word, she indicated her intention to leave. *What a polite way to tell someone to get lost*, she thought. *They intend to never let me participate in another meeting again.*

She heard the men’s amused laughter behind her as she exited the tent...



“**AH**, Inquisitor Imlerith.”

“Nerim... So this is where you were. I decided to take a bit of a break myself. Mind if I join you?”

Krähe was walking without a destination when she came upon Lytrain journaling in a corner of their squad’s recreational tent. Normally this place would be teeming with people, but the girls easily spotted each other because no one else was there.

Krähe quietly sat beside Lytrain. She’d been removed from her squad’s activities. The Paladins would decide their next course of action without her, and it was hard to say how that would affect Saint Lytrain.

No, stop lying to yourself. They’ll absolutely seek it. They will order her to offer every last memory she has to Arlos to overturn this crisis with a transcendent Miracle... Krähe writhed with anger at the thought.

“Inquisitor Imlerith. I’m...okay with it.”

“Okay with what?” Krähe asked despite knowing the answer. She wished she could prevent her young friend from saying the rest. She didn’t want to hear Lytrain voice her resolve.

“Using...my power,” Lytrain said. “I believe God granted me this power for this exact moment.”

“You... You should think more about your own happiness,” Krähe insisted. “You should be rewarded for suffering so much, for serving others, and for giving everything to God.”

Lytrain didn’t nod in agreement with Krähe’s argument.

“Nerim. Once you cross that line, *you* will cease to exist. Please don’t force me to make that decision,” Krähe pleaded with everything she had. She had never cursed her lack of charisma more than she did now.

I’ll do something about it, so please don’t make that decision. It was easy

to say such a thing, but it took skill and dialogue to persuade another person to believe you. Lytrain seemed determined to follow through with it, but she also seemed resigned to the idea. Like she had given up on there being another option.

“Inquisitor Imleth... Do you think I’ll ever see Father again?”

Krähe said nothing.

“I have nothing left. I lost it all. I wonder if there’s any reason for me to keep on living.”

Krähe wanted her to live. She wanted her to live and find happiness. That was her greatest wish. But was she just being selfish? Was there really nothing she could do for her young friend anymore? A sense of powerlessness dominated Krähe.

There’s no hope... Not for us here, at least.

“I did good deeds, so I’m sure I’ll see Father on the other side. That’s what I think...” Lytrain quietly shared.

Several hours later.

Welcomed by the Paladins and followers of Arlos, Lytrain announced she would use her Miracle Artes. The people smiled and extolled her decision.



“WHY, God! Why!!”

Krähe’s private quarters were trashed. The room, usually tidy and organized in a way that reflected her methodical personality, was now in complete disarray. All the furniture was smashed and broken. Paperwork was strewn about.

Standing in the middle of the chaos, wailing, was a dejected young woman whose only wish was dashed. A foolish and powerless young woman who couldn’t even protect her only friend.

The god she clung to didn’t answer her.

The god she clung to didn’t save her.

There was but one road for the abandoned to take...

“Forgive me, Arlos. You have forsaken us...”

Krähe slowly rose to her feet like a ghost. She staggered from the room and never returned.



“OWIE, owie, ow, ow, owie! No violence! Stoooooop! Yooooour! VIOLEEEEEENCE!”

A melodramatic scream echoed through the churchyard. This was the base of operations for the Cult of Ira in Amrita. Their church was an extensively renovated chapel in the southern parish.

The man bound hand and foot with a straw rope and strapped to a wooden hanging stand specially made for him was none other than Mynoghra’s Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio. And the ones mercilessly wailing on him, causing him to scream and whine like a little baby, were Mynoghra’s very own Witches of Regret, the Elfuur Sisters.

“This doesn’t even count as violence,” Caria said. “You’re a Hero, you’re made different, no? I’m going to punch you two to three more times.”

“Hehehe. It’ll show on his face, so go for the stomach, Caria.”

“Good idea. You’re the smartest, Big Sista.”

The hour was midnight. The moon was out—the perfect time for the Elfuur Sisters to manifest their powers as Witches. The fact Vittorio could easily take even a play-beating from these twin sisters, who had long strayed from the shackles of mortal existence and possessed strong powers as Heroes, revealed his own status as a Hero. Although...no one would dare call him a *hero* with how pathetic he looked.

“Serves ya right, Archlector Idiot. I kept tellin’ ya not to get up to any funny business, but you just didn’t listen. This is what you get. Seriously reflect on yer actions, stupid,” Lector Yona’Yona cut into him with her words.

The Heroes weren’t the only ones present. Yona’Yona watched Vittorio get beaten with irritation, and the new followers of Ira were looking on at this odd chastisement ritual with confusion. Furthermore, the original cultists who followed Vittorio to this city were tired of seeing this same scene play out, so they just focused on getting the work assigned to them taken care of.

For better or worse, this was a common scene in the Cult of Ira.

“Oh! Please let me have a turn once you’re finished!” Yona’Yona asked of the twins. “I still haven’t beaten him up for going off on his own the other day!”

“Okey-dokey,” Maria said.

“Sure thing,” Caria said.

“What the hell is wrong with these bratssss? Aren’t you all a little too comfortable with violence?!”

Vittorio complained about his situation, but he was just reaping what he sowed. It was especially unforgivable of him to deviate from his agreement of noninterference with the Arlos followers just to go and stir up trouble. Neither Yona’Yona nor the Elfuur Sisters gave a jot about what happened to the Arlos

followers because of him, but their agreement was made in Takuto and the Cult of Ira's name. Breaking the agreement meant smearing mud on Takuto's good name. And that was the one thing these girls wouldn't stand for.

Hence the chastisement by physical punishment. They had given up on getting through to Vittorio with his warped personality, but they at least needed to take out their frustrations on him through beatings. For that reason, Vittorio was strung up and turned into the perfect punching bag. He did seem to feel pain, but also didn't seem to care. If anything, he actually seemed to come up with new schemes while being smacked around.

In fact, a nauseating sneer turned up the corners of his lips as he directed his gaze toward a spot in the distance. "You must have the utmost respect for those in your circle and never sacrifice your friends. That's a basic and universal rule for mortals. Don't you think, Inquisitor Imlerith?"

"Vittorio..."

Krähe Imlerith, High Inquisitor with the Holy Kingdom of Qualia, appeared from the shadows. She should have been a devout servant of Arlos, loyal to his holy teachings.

"Is it all right if I assume your visitation at this late hour means you are willing to accept my deal?"

Surprise flashed across Krähe's face when she saw Vittorio hanging in the air, questioning her with all seriousness. She quickly caught herself and schooled her features. She must've understood his query, but she fell silent, her expression grim. Everyone could tell she was hesitating.

"Hm, I don't know what brought ya here, but we'll welcome you with open arms if yer joining us," Yona'Yona said. "But there's no turning back once you're one of the family... Oh and this weirdo is an outlier." She jabbed her finger in Vittorio's direction. "The rest are good people. There's nothing to worry 'bout. I guarantee it."

"Hehe. We're a good place to be," Maria giggled. "Forget everything that's happened and join us."

"It seems like you are suffering, so if you want to be with us, we welcome you. But if not, leave before your presence becomes a nuisance," Caria warned.

It was the dead of night. The moon was high in the dark sky, and the overwhelming evil aura exuding from the twins filled the churchyard with an unbearable pressure that made one want to run with fear. Yet, standing in direct contrast to their aura, their words were filled with kindness for Krähe. Even Caria's harsher word choice seemed like it was meant to give her the push she needed to make her choice.

Their reactions made Krähe want to ask them about her situation—about

Nerim's situation. Strangely enough, she felt like a sinner about to confess her sins to God.

"Nerim is a pitiful child," she began. "I wanted her to be happy. That's all I ever wanted...and yet God never rewarded her. Not once."

"That's because your god doesn't reward faith," Yona'Yona said. "Seems like it's forbidden to seek something in return for believing."

This was the foundation of the Holy Teachings of Arlos. God gave instructions, but never saved. Or rather, God's salvation was given through the Saints and clergy. He saved people through the Miracles wielded by the Saints—that no mortal could wield. The clergy were the guardians of those Miracles. They preached Arlos's teachings to the masses and showed the Saints to those seeking help.

...This was the Holy God Arlos's law and order. The absolute holy law.

But then that begged the question: who would save the Saint? Who would help the Saint who was always required to aid others and had to make a huge sacrifice in exchange for using her great power? The Holy God Arlos never said.

"It is just too heartbreaking. Why does such a little girl have to be treated this way?" Krähe lamented. "I'm just too powerless to save her."

"There is only so much a mortal can do," Vittorio replied. "You are a mortal, not a god."

Every Mynoghran in this region knew about Lytrain—about the Scribe Saint's situation. They didn't obtain this information through unjust means—it was easily picked up by listening to the gossip and through her own actions. Saints normally aren't supposed to perform their Miracles in public, and there was a gag order in place when it came to them. The fact that information about her was readily available despite this rule was proof that the Scribe Saint was performing excessive Miracles, which served as evidence that the holy forces were desperate. Put simply, by allowing her to wield her powers left and right, they placed an immense physical burden upon Lytrain, risking her very existence.

"I don't care what happens to me if it saves her. Please just save her. Help her. Nerim will cease to exist in return for her Miracles," Krähe begged, thinking of nothing but Lytrain.

It would be easy to criticize her for succumbing to evil. But what other means did she have to save her young friend? What miracle could save Saint Lytrain? Miracles are not the domain of mortals. They are performed in the realm of the gods. For this reason, it was inevitable that Krähe Imlerith would seek a miracle from another god.

"Unlike a certain holier-than-thou god, ours is not a petty God. He will

save both the pitiful Saint and you, her pitiful friend. Didn't I tell you? A HAPPY ENDING awaits!" Vittorio declared in a loud and sonorous voice that traveled far and wide.

He wasn't lying. He blindly believed in the perfection of his own god—Takuto—from the bottom of his heart. If he was willing to make that declaration, then Krähe and Lytrain were bound to be saved. Vittorio had that much power. His master had that much power.

The flames of hope ignited within Krähe once again. At the very end of the line, she finally decided to take the hand offered her.

...No matter the lies she told herself, no matter the excuses she made, there was only ever one truth. She wanted to save Nerim. Always. From the outset. Until the very end.

"Theeeen, without further ado, forsake your former god and speak words of worship for our God," Vittorio said. "Then everything will be completed."

"I..."

Krähe's needle of fate snapped in the opposite direction.

"...forsake Arlos."

Something changed in that moment. It was hard to explain what had changed, but curiously enough, Krähe felt refreshed. Some kind of heavy weight had been lifted from her and in return, she was wrapped up in a warm blanket. Almost as if she were returned to the safety of her mother's womb. It was a strange and welcome sense of peace.

Krähe had forsaken her god and surrendered to evil for help. But after going through with it, she found it a little strange that she wasn't all that different from who she was before.

"Mm-mm-mm, very goooood!"

A jester of a man approached Krähe with such a wide grin, it seemed to fill his whole face.



None other than Vittorio himself—having slipped out of his restraints at some point—came skipping over to her. He placed his hands on her shoulders and began shmoozing away like some pickup artist.

“Krähe, ma chérie. You know where it’s at! Most people would just say NO at this point! You’ve got grit, accepting the deal now! I’m impressed! Let’s be the best of friends! Wanna go on a date with me later? How about to an aquarium?”

I see. He really is annoying, Krähe thought. When she was facing him as a part of Qualia’s forces, she believed Yona’Yona’s revulsion of Vittorio was all a part of some scheme, but now that she had converted to the Cult of Ira, she knew the truth. It was no act—Vittorio was an annoying arse, plain and simple. Krähe was instantly filled with sympathy for Lector Yona’Yona.

“Oi, Archlector Idiot,” Yona’Yona growled. “Don’t go touchin’ a lady without permission, you perv!”

“GUAGH!”

Yona’Yona stepped in and helped out Krähe yet again while she was wrestling with her new feelings. She raced over like an angry bull, pulled her fist back, and slammed it into Vittorio. Then she spun around to face Krähe.

Krähe forgot all about the loser who fell to the ground like a used rag and carefully studied Yona’Yona’s face.

“Well, how do I put it?” Yona’Yona began. “Seems like you’ve got a lot going on, but let’s be friends like that idiot said. Um, the Saint, was it? Bring her here, okay? She’s in a hell of a pinch, right?” She smiled and held out her hand.

“Y-Yes...”

Krähe accepted her handshake. Her contempt for Beastmen had all but vanished, replaced by a sense of gratitude for her warm reception. Krähe was certain she could get along with this girl. She could only draw that opinion from having interacted with Yona’Yona the longest, outside of Vittorio, but she had a feeling life on this side might not be so bad after all. There was even a chance it might be easier living than when she was bound by all of Arlos’s holy restrictions...

If this is what life here is like, then Nerim will surely... She surely won’t be treated poorly. I have a feeling she can just live as a normal girl.

Everything was headed toward the happiness Vittorio had promised.

However...

“Damn.” Vittorio had recovered from his K.O. and tottered over to them with a bleak expression. He seemed to have something on his mind because he laced his fingers together and cursed lightly under his breath. It was a rare display from the Spin Doctor who hid everything behind a sneer. Even

Yona'Yona, intent on ignoring him, was worried enough to ask him what was wrong.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought we had gotten to the winning run here, but it appears I’ll need to rework my plan.”

Everyone was puzzled by his cryptic words. What did he mean? Before anyone could ask, another person walked out of the shadows.

“Oh me, oh my... The foolishness of man often has them willingly walk straight into their own ruin. And when they make that fatal mistake, they tend to pigheadedly believe they made the right choice,” Vittorio said sagely.

“N-Nerim...”

Out from the shadows stepped Krähe’s dearest friend, the girl she cherished more than anything and wanted to save at any cost. The girl for whom she had abandoned everything and even forsook the Holy God Arlos to ensure her happiness—Scribe Saint Lytrain Nerim Quartz.

“Don’t take another step forward, heartrending young Saint. This is my only warning stemming from the fragment of compassion I hold for you,” Vittorio warned in a solemn tone.

The silent girl was standing right before them, yet she seemed to be miles away...

Chapter 15: Aurora

NERIM took a step forward. It was a step she wanted to take and mustered all her courage for. This was the first step she took because she wanted to, not because someone wished it or asked it of her.

“Inquisitor Imlerith. I have received many things from you.” Her trembling voice betrayed her nervousness and displayed her burning resolve. “I knew that...you have always looked out for me. But I have been so preoccupied with my own issues, so busy trying to save whoever I was ordered to save, I forgot to even thank you.” She spoke slowly.

Krähe quietly shook her head, trying to convey she was wrong. But she was too frightened of what Nerim’s resolve was about to bring about, only tears spilled down her cheeks as the words caught in her throat.

“The truth is, I actually wanted to call you by name, but I even forgot that desire,” Nerim said sadly. “I’m forever a child, so I’m always being protected like one. Always the one being helped. But you... You were suffering too.”

When Nerim went to visit Krähe’s room to say goodbye for good, she saw its wrecked state and realized for the first time just how much the person crying in front of her was thinking about her. Suffering for her. To the point she forsook her holy beliefs and fell into evil just to save Nerim.

Nerim hugged her journal so tightly to her chest, it hurt. As if the pain would help her reflect on all the memories contained within. As if that were the driving force pushing her to act. She hugged it to receive courage from all the people erased from her memories.

“But...I won’t make the same mistake again,” Nerim declared. “I can finally say it with confidence: my power, my memories, exist for this moment. I would rather save you than anyone else. Not because it’s a good deed, but because it is what I want. So I am going to return everything I have received from you now. Don’t worry. My heart is forever with you.”

“D-Don’t...” Krähe wrenched out. “That’s wrong. You’ve got it all wrong, Nerim.”

Krähe wept, realizing Nerim couldn’t—wouldn’t—be stopped.

Krähe had made a do-or-die decision, hoping for the best, but it yielded the worst possible result for everyone. It wasn’t anyone in particular’s fault. There was no evil scheming or malice behind what had happened. Sometimes tragedies

occur when everyone is just a little too kind.

“So don’t cry,” Nerim said. “Don’t lose to evil.”

“Wait, Nerim!” Krähe cried.

“I’ll save you.”

An invisible shockwave blew Krähe back when she ran toward Nerim screaming. A pulsing white, shining holy forcefield surrounded Nerim, repelling all obstacles and guiding her pious prayers to fulfillment.

“O Lord, I grant you every memory of the ones I hold most dear...”

Quietly, yet clearly, her declaration reached all present. Her prayers to Arlos wrought miracles. Nerim’s sincere prayer, which she poured her very being into, was eventually heard by the Holy God Arlos.

“...So please, grant me the power to save Miss Krähe.”

An aurora’s arch of light, bright enough to illuminate the world, warmly enveloped the young girl.



THE holy light illuminated the area so brightly that it banished the night. What was the state of the girl standing at the center of that light? It was too bright and powerful to approach. All Krähe could do was fall to her knees and mourn her loss.

“Aaaah, Nerim... Why? All your humble servant—all *I*—ever wanted was for you to be happy...” she whispered, her voice full of regret.

Where did she go wrong? What could she have done better? And who in Arlos’s name would appear once that burst of brilliant light faded?

“What an unamusing farce. Hopeless child, going out of your way to become unhappy, to play the part of the tragic heroine for no damn good reason,” Vittorio spat, bristling with contempt. A rare display of emotion for him. His irritation seemed less directed at any one person and more a case of pure revulsion over this turn of events. “Buuut...we’re in for a ride to see what happens next.”

The brief glimpse of his true persona was hidden behind the trickster’s mask once more as he decided to watch over the outcome with an air of frivolity.

Nervous tension filled the air.

Yona’Yona and the Elfuur Sisters were already in battle positions. They were up against someone who’d declared she would save Krähe before calling on her holy god. It didn’t take a genius to guess what was coming next.

The blinding light receded...leaving the girl, unchanged, in its wake.

However, there was one thing that had changed...

“Hmm? Huh? What am I doing here?”

...the damning reality that something irrevocable had been done.

“Booo! I don’t get it! Where am I?”

An all-too-innocent voice rang out from the girl despite the serious situation. The innocence suited her age, but anyone who had heard Nerim speak before would’ve sensed something was terribly off. Watching her act completely confused about the situation made the others wonder how to proceed.

Nerim had obtained immeasurable power in return for offering up *all* her memories. At the cost of her everything. In other words, she’d even lost her purpose. Nerim had nothing now. The empty, innocent shell of a girl who didn’t know anything could only stand there confused. Until...

“Oh? What’s this?”

The girl opened the journal in her hands. She seemed to just be reading it page by page before she suddenly started flipping through the pages at an alarming speed. Before long, she snapped the large journal shut and held it under her arm.

“Oh, I see...” She slowly lifted her head. “I have to defeat the bad guys.”

She set her sights on the Mynoghrans, her eyes wide and dead.



Holy power raged like a storm around her. This torrent of power, surpassing even the aurora from before, was the Miracle Arte Arlos granted her after she sacrificed all her memories. You could see how precious those memories were by looking at the raging light enveloping the entire city.

Arlos had indeed granted this pitiful girl power commensurate with her sacrifice. Her Miracle increased in brilliance and called upon even more Miracles.

“God! Gimme the power to beat up the bad guys!”

The already overpowered holy aura emanating from Nerim increased in size and scale. How? She’d already sacrificed all she had and received Arlos’s miracle. Nerim should already have the power to save Krähe. Yet the phenomenon they just witnessed seemed to grant Nerim even more power on top of that.

“I see. So that’s how it works?” Vittorio observed. “This is game breaking. Everyone, watch yourselves.”

Sweat trickled down Vittorio’s forehead. Only he realized how her ability worked. By sacrificing all of her memories, she could gain immeasurable power. But that was a double-edged sword. Or rather, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a one-way trip to self-destruction. Because losing all memories was the same as losing all purpose.

She retained her ability to speak, move, and understand things, making her seem like any other human at first glance. But on the inside, she was devoid of memories, and therefore, had no aspirations or desires based on those memories.

Memories are what make a person who they are. That was why Nerim had suffered so much until now. Losing all of one’s memories will just turn them into a living doll that can speak.

And that was the intended ending all along. Arlos’s punishment was meted out to those who selfishly gave up everything in pursuit of an unlawful, outrageous Miracle. Damned to a fate as an empty doll with overwhelming power.

But...the journal she carried everywhere changed everything. Memories were irrelevant when her daily habit of reading her journal had been so engraved in her mind and muscle memory it now gave her purpose and indicated a direction for the empty doll to take.

She had become the exception to the rule that not even Arlos had expected. It all resulted in Lytrain Nerim Quartz being reborn as a perfect Saint who could justly save everyone.

And left behind a hell of a ticking timebomb at the same time.

They had no way of knowing this, but the ability given to the Scribe Saint

had a slightly irregular design in which it first delivered a Miracle and then erased the appropriate memory in return. As far as Arlos was concerned when he designed this ability, he never considered the possibility of someone praying for more miracles after they had already dedicated all their memories. He didn't consider the possibility of an empty doll seeking Miracles by reading her journal.

He didn't create any countermeasures for it either.

An error in Arlos's design... This was the conclusion Vittorio instantly came to based on the circumstances in which mysterious phenomena were often pushed through by this world's system and game mechanics.

What it all came down to was that Arlos's Miracles could be performed infinitely. As much as the Scribe Saint prayed for them.

"Is this for real...? This is a seriously bonkers screwup." Vittorio wanted to unleash a slew of swears over this so-called holy god's crappy ability design. Unfortunately, his thoughts were interrupted by a burst of light announcing the start of battle.

The overflowing light of justice drove away evil. The lone member of the forces of good attacked the people of Mynoghra with overwhelming power.

"Everybody, get out of here!" Caria, already in an attack stance and powered by the moonlight, ordered all noncombatants to evacuate. She brandished her weapon, sharply watching for any holes in her enemy's defense so she could strike.

The Elfuur Sisters' gaze piqued Nerim's curiosity as she turned to look at them without any malice or ill will on her innocent face. "Oh! Who are you girls? Um...um... I know! You're those Cult of Ira people! Bad people! I'm gonna get you!"

The ground exploded and before Caria knew it, Scribe Saint Nerim was right in front of her. Caria hastily raised her halberd and defended against the journal swinging down at her with Arlos's divine protection wrapped around it. She glanced at her sister and shouted, "Big Sista!"

They were twins. It was easy for them to convey what they wanted without words. Maria slashed at Nerim with her dual blades while she was focused on Caria.

"Whoa! Whew! That was scary!" Nerim exclaimed. "But that's not enough to get me!" Contrary to her frazzled words, Nerim deflected Maria's attack as if she knew it was coming and jumped back far enough to start paging through her journal again.

"My ability doesn't work..." Maria said. "Does that mean she's really forgotten everything there is to forget?"

“Tch! She should’ve just obediently come to our side!” Yona’Yona shouted.

Both Maria’s Addle and Caria’s Plague did not affect Nerim. Nerim’s overwhelming holy aura blocked their skills. The twins’ abilities weren’t perfect. They were without equal but could still be resisted by those of a certain level or power threshold. At the very least, they understood the Saint before them was at a level that even Witches enhanced to their near strongest by the moonlit night couldn’t overcome.

And the situation rapidly spiraled from there.

“God! Gimme power! Gimme more power! The power to defeat the baddies!”

“Aaaaah!”

Arlos’s Miracle came down and blew the twins away. It illuminated the world, shining brightly like the middle of the day and driving the darkness away.

The stronger fighter was made clear.

The polar lights that threatened to illuminate the whole world obliterated the moon. With the twins weakened by the loss of the moonlight, the source of their enhanced strength, they would have a difficult time suppressing Nerim.

Yona’Yona, who’d remained to orchestrate the followers of Ira’s retreat, couldn’t stop the quiver in her voice when she commented on Nerim’s overwhelming strength. “Th-That’s an insane ability... Is this what happens when a Saint gets serious?”

“Non, non. Not even close,” Vittorio said, leisurely launching into an explanation beside her. “The power of the Scribe Saint is normally limited and requires sacrifice to use. Even if she gains tremendous power for her memories, losing all of her memories means losing herself. Her very essence as a person. Normally, that is! If all was *normal*, she was destined to become nothing more than a doll with strong powers!”

It seemed so out of place for him to be giving this explanation during such dire circumstances, even if he couldn’t fight. But at least his explanation helped Yona’Yona understand what was going on.

“It’s that damn journal!” she realized. “She’s decidin’ what to do every time she reads it, right?!”

“Most likely. Reading the journal probably became a habit imprinted on her subconscious,” Vittorio deduced. “That’s why she hasn’t forgotten everything even after losing her memories. And she knows what to do once she rereads it.”

As if to prove his theory, Nerim began rereading her journal. She seemed so defenseless like that, as if she were just begging to be attacked as she pored

over the pages, but it was obvious to everyone present that it was a trap Nerim had obviously set for them. The eternal light encapsulating her protected her from all harm—as if protecting her in place of the memories of her loved ones.

“Still, you gotta admire the earthshattering power she obtained for sacrificing all her memories with her dear father! Alack, how fleeting! Alas, how beautiful! How tragic! I could watch this all day!” Vittorio cackled.

Vittorio took no further action once things had gone south. There was nothing for the Gleeful Spin Doctor to do when his forte was stirring up things with subterfuge and words. None of his skills could do anything here, either. The holy aura protecting Nerim would resist them all. So Vittorio stayed on the sidelines as a member of the peanut gallery, but...

“You there! Shut up! This journal says to never let the baddies talk too much!”

Nerim appeared right in front of Vittorio. She tried to slam her journal down into his cranium at a speed too fast for eyes to follow.

“Goooooooooooo! Emergency evasionooooooooon!”

He dodged at the last second. But her attack didn’t end there. Nerim stumbled a step when her swing missed, but she immediately pivoted and used the momentum to swing the journal toward the schemester’s torso. He couldn’t avoid that one. Vittorio thought his life was up. But then Caria and Maria cut in at the speed of a falcon and blocked Nerim’s attack with their weapons.

“Merci! You seriously saved me, mon petit monstre!”

“Shut it!” Caria snapped. “If you’ve got time to squawk, do something! Why else do you still have that crafty head of yours?!”

“Do something now, Mr. Perv,” Maria demanded. “We’ll all go down at this rate.”

Even though the twins were insulting and making demands of him, he could see the situation flustered them. They could only deflect that last attack because they worked together. It was obvious things would go south fast if Nerim got even a little more serious about her attacks.

“Hrm-dee-hrm-hrmm. Good point...”

Vittorio glanced at Nerim. She was staring off into space then suddenly looked at her journal as if she just remembered to. Mynoghra was able to hold her off because she was this unstable. It was an unspoken request from the twins for him to devise a plan during this moment of weakness.

But was there even a way to reverse the situation? Or was this not even a situation that troubled Vittorio in the first place? Even as things became dire, the Gleeful Spin Doctor held his tongue and did nothing.

“Nerim! Nerim! Stop! Please stop this!”

“Umm, who are you, miss? Hold on a sec, okay...?”

There was yet another person who was flustered and panicked by the rapidly deteriorating situation—Inquisitor Krähe Imlerith. She had been stupefied by the drastic turn of events and the exchange of blows that seemed to happen in the blink of an eye. Though she fell into despair over her dear friend’s transformation, she still called out to Nerim, hoping beyond hope to reach her.

Perhaps her words had some effect because Nerim studied her journal a little longer than she had thus far.

“Oooh! Miss Krähe! It says you took good care of me! The person who always looked after me! The person who was kind to me! My favorite person! It says to save you! It says I’ll save you no matter the cost! Huh. This page is soaked with tears.”

The journal undeniably contained a record of the unspoken feelings of a lost, kind girl. Did Nerim anticipate this outcome? Did she know she would lose herself? Her desperate wish for her future self gave the guileless girl a direction called hope. Or it should have...

“But I wonder why?” Nerim pondered. “You are dyed in evil. Umm, lemme see, I’m supposed to defeat the bad guys, but I’m also supposed to save Miss Krähe? Huh. Then what should I do?”

The worst-case scenario reared its head.

Nerim’s recorded wish to save Krähe and her wish to defeat evil conflicted with each other. Two contradictory paths were presented to the directionless girl. Nerim pored over the pages, confused over how to handle the discrepancy.

“I guess...I’ll start by defeating everybody but Miss Krähe?” she concluded.

“Nerim!” Krähe cried out to her. “Please listen to me! Your father will be saddened by what you are doing!”

“My father? I have a daddy?! How wonderful! Where is he? Um, um...” Nerim speed-read through the journal. “Huh. It doesn’t say anything about a daddy.”

Krähe made a fatal mistake. Nerim’s journal didn’t contain a single entry on her father. She didn’t write about him because she held out hope that she would never, ever give up her memories of him. She had the horrible feeling that if she did write about him, she’d lose those memories. That fear made her hesitate to ever record it within the journal. And that was precisely why...Nerim would never know about her father now, no matter how they tried to convince her otherwise.

It was pointless to utter her father’s name now, for “The Scribe Saint doesn’t have a father.” Ironically enough, those were the same words she heard

every day from the heartless clergy who tried to eliminate Verdel's influence from Nerim's life when she became a Saint...

"N-No, it can't be..." Krähe gasped.

"You tricked me. I knew you were *evil*. Die."

Nerim ruthlessly tried to smash Krähe's face as she froze in despair.

"You're as badest as him! I keep telling you people not to run your mouths!"

"GHH!"

Caria Elfuur saved her life. She predicted an attack would come and covered for Krähe at the last second. But she couldn't fully block it like she did the last attack on Vittorio. She did the best she could by kicking Krähe's torso, sending the Inquisitor flying backward. Krähe took considerable damage from the hit, but it was better than having her face pulverized.

"Huh. Why do you hurt your friends?" Nerim asked. "Isn't Inquisitor Imlerith one of you bad guys?"

Caria answered her with silence. Maria was searching for an opening from behind her but wasn't going to take action until she could land a decisive blow. Far behind Caria, Krähe staggered to her feet, clutching her stomach and moaning.

"Hm? ...Oh! I get it!" Nerim exclaimed. "Baddies just can't get along! Hehehe. Meanies!"

Nerim stepped forward. Caria clicked her tongue in frustration at her cowardice for taking an instinctive step back from her.

Nerim took another step closer, closing the distance.

"Huh? What was I doing? Weird. Who are you people?"

Nerim lost her memory again, forgetting all about the prior exchange. Did she seek out another Miracle? Or were abnormalities forming in the Miracle system? Whatever the case, the girl who lost her memories as often as she blinked evoked more sympathy than disgust from those who watched her.

"Oh, but before that, I gotta save people!" Nerim declared. "It says saving people is a good deed! What do I get for good deeds, I wonder? Well, whatever. If the journal says so, it must be so!"

The twins slowly backed away from Nerim. Her timely bout of amnesia saved their lives. Nerim's attention had shifted elsewhere this time. If they were to believe her muttering, then "this" Nerim prioritized saving people.

The curse of Plague and Forget no longer existed in this land with the propagation of faith in Ira. Mynoghra had removed the curse it placed like an arsonist returning to the scene of the crime to put out his own fire. So Nerim claiming she needed to "save" people seemed odd.

“God! O God! Gimme power! Gimme more power! Gimme the power to save people!”

Another aurora enveloped the area. Its light was too bright for the forces of evil. This was true both in the literal sense and in its holy nature that tried to burn the darkness out of them.

The Elfuur Sisters stared at the blinding scene, grimacing. They never took their eyes off Nerim, keeping close watch over what was coming next. Yona’Yona crept up behind them and whispered, “Caria, Maria, we’re losing followers of Ira by the second in this city.”

They were losing believers in the Cult of Ira. As Lector of the cult, Yona’Yona had a general grasp of the movement and number of followers. Her unique skill informed Yona’Yona that the number of believers in this area was rapidly decreasing.

“Is that her god’s Miracle?” Caria asked. “It’s too powerful. Cary’s Plague has no effect, either. Things don’t look good. How do we proceed?”

Caria couldn’t know for sure, but she assumed Arlos’s Miracle removed the people’s belief in Ira and replaced it with his holy teachings again. Caria had seen Vittorio’s skills indoctrinate the masses in a similar way. She acknowledged such a thing could happen in any number of ways. That didn’t make the situation any more acceptable for Mynoghra’s camp.

“Hehehe. This is too much for us to handle. If you don’t do something quick, there’ll be losses, Mr. Perv. That would be a failure. His Majesty will be disappointed,” Maria urged Vittorio to act again. It was her warning for him to do something soon or else. Bringing up their king—bringing up Takuto—was her declaration that they couldn’t wait any longer.

It was well-known that Vittorio was a fanatical believer in Takuto Ira. The twins were fully aware that bringing up the king would stop him from acting with as much abandon as he usually did. They had saved this trump card as a countermeasure for when Vittorio went too far. And it seemed to work.

“Well, the time is right, I suppose. Not even moi thought things would get this messy. I’d love to take this chance to up and flee, buuuut...” Vittorio glanced at Nerim. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately—it was hard to say—she met his eyes, her expression blank.

“Huh? Who are you people?”

Her attention shifted to them. She’d lost her memories once again, forgetting all about her desire to save the people a moment ago. Without a purpose, she focused on taking out what was right in front of her.

She snapped the journal shut.

“Umm. Are you the bad guys? Then I gotta defeat you!”

“I’ll take her on so you can escape,” Vittorio declared, a nervous edge to his voice.



AT the former headquarters of the Cult of Ira in Amrita, everyone had evacuated, leaving behind only two figures. One spawn of evil was about to meet his end beneath a giant pillar of light.

“Ueegh...”

Covered from head to toe in injuries, Vittorio no longer had any strength left. His limbs were crushed, his body battered and bruised. But his pitch-black eyes gleamed with a fiery blaze as they fixed upon Nerim, his unsettling sneer curling up to cover even more of his face in his pride.

“Phew... I’m tired. This person runs around like a wild rabbit. I was taken by surprise. But it’s bye-bye time for you!”

Nerim lifted the journal—the embodiment of the precious records that made her, her—above her head.

Vittorio opened his eyes as wide as they’d go to burn the image into his mind and shouted his final words to the heavens. “O my master, Takuto Ira... I shall die as you ordered me to! Ooh, hear me, great and true God! My GOD!”

“Goodbye, mister.”

A dull thud echoed through the empty churchyard.

That was it. That was where it ended.

All that remained was silence. An eerie silence and nothingness.

After a short while, the young girl looked around her in surprise and began poring over the pages of her mysteriously blood-soaked journal.

Chapter 16: Encore

<Divine City Amrita, Outskirts>

THE Cult of Ira—otherwise known as Mynoghra’s forces—had safely escaped Saint Lytrain’s attention thanks to Vittorio’s sacrifice at the final hour.

“Looks like...no one’s on our tail,” Yona’Yona said. “That painfully intense light is still hanging over Amrita...”

They lacked the numbers they had started with. Yona’Yona and the Elfuur Sisters had escaped together, but they had overwhelmingly fewer followers in tow. It’s not that they failed to escape in time. Judging by the fact Yona’Yona recognized most of the followers they still had with them, it seemed the people they brought to Amrita were unaffected. All the new believers they’d obtained in this city had reverted to their original alignment.

“Did she let us go? Or did she just not care...?” Yona’Yona muttered, staring absently in the direction of the city, her exhaustion weighing heavily on her features. Pillars of light rose from the city center, indicating the Saint was still shooting off Miracles left and right from that same spot.

“The latter, I’d say,” Maria answered. “I’m positive saving people came first in the list of priorities recorded in that journal.”

“She didn’t seem to know her left from right anymore,” Caria added. “Better for us.”

Even the Elfuur Sisters seemed tired. The unobstructed moon hanging in the sky gave them power again, but the mental strain of fighting under extreme duress zapped their usual energy. That said, they should be safe now that they’d made it this far...as long as nothing came at them out of left field. All that was left for them to do was retreat to their own territory under the cover of night, and that was a forte of these girls who belonged to the darkness.

“So? What’ll you do now?”

Now that things had settled enough for them to move on to the next stage of action, Yona’Yona decided to take care of one small problem. Her gaze and question were aimed at Inquisitor Krähe Imlerith. The Elfuur Sisters had scooped her up while she stood there in shock and escaped this far with her. Perhaps it’d be better to call her FORMER Inquisitor. After all, she had willingly forsaken the god she believed in.

“As Nerim’s humble servant I... I don’t know what I should do anymore. Who in the world do I look to? I just don’t know...” she whispered.

“Mm...” Yona’Yona mulled it over a moment. “Well, it’s important to stop and take a break when things get too tough to figure out! Not to brag, but we’re experts at that. In any case, ya can’t return to your homeland anymore, right? Then come with us.” She cheerfully patted Krähe on the back.

Some of the hardest crossroads we come to in life don’t always have an immediate answer. It’d be cruel to ask her to decide her stance and future goals right here and now. What she needed most was rest. A hot drink and a place to lay her head. Once she rested enough to relieve her mental and physical fatigue, she could finally turn her attention to the future.

Yona’Yona’s own experience and the experiences of the people she’d shepherded until now helped her give Krähe the best possible advice for her situation. Yona’Yona’s position as Lector wasn’t just for show. She had the qualifications to serve as one.

Besides, Krähe had pledged allegiance to the great and mighty King Takuto Ira. Going as far as forsaking her own holy god to do so. Yona’Yona couldn’t imagine her great God not sympathizing with Krähe’s suffering. Evil gods, unlike holy gods, always save the suffering after all...

“It’s hard to believe...” Yona’Yona muttered, her gaze softening as Krähe silently nodded and began walking with them.

The long-eared Dark Elf sisters overheard her quiet utterance and instantly understood what she was referring to. Their thoughts turned to the annoying man they had tried to put out of their minds.

“He died,” Maria supplied.

“Extinguished faster than a candle,” Caria added.

Vittorio staying behind until they could escape meant he protected them at the cost of his own life. There was a slim chance he was still alive since they hadn’t confirmed his death with their own eyes, but it seemed unlikely considering the powerful Saint he was up against.

Vittorio was not a combat unit. Anyone who had spent any amount of time with him came to understand as much. They would be lying if they said they didn’t think it possible for that supernatural genius of his to come up with an ingenious escape plan at the last second. But those hopes were dashed when Yona’Yona and the Elfuur Sisters sensed the last remaining dark aura in the city get completely extinguished.

“Damn you, Archlector Idiot. You don’t get to go and croak on me like that after all you’ve done to screw around with me and our plans...” Yona’Yona cursed, loneliness creeping into her voice.

The Elfuur Sisters didn't respond. They realized there was a unique relationship between Yona'Yona and Vittorio that they could never fully understand. Empty platitudes often become a thorn in the side of those who are already grieving. The twins had tasted the bitter sadness of loss, so they understood more than most that silence is the greatest kindness sometimes.

"You ruined my plans to put you through the wringer, beat the crap outta you, and say thank you..."

A cold wind blew between them. The biting night breeze rapidly stole their heat. As the heat powering them forward chilled, loneliness filled their hearts, as if they had lost something important to them.

"Let's return to Seldoch first," Caria said.

"We'll consult His Majesty about what to do there," Maria said.

At the twins' command, their ragtag group began their slow march toward Seldoch. They were used to moving at night. As long as no one came after them, they wouldn't run into any trouble on the journey to Seldoch—a city they controlled to the south.

But the situation was far from good. They might even be forced to abandon Seldoch depending on what came next. It would be a shame to let go of one of the most prominent cities in the Southern Province after they went through all the effort to conquer it, but fleeing was the only way to handle the berserker Scribe Saint. The rest would depend on what King Takuto Ira decided.

After all, the master schemer they had come to rely on in their own weird way was no more...

Yona'Yona turned around and took one last look at Amrita as though to burn its scenery into her memories.

"...This sucks."

Her muttered words disappeared with the night breeze. No one said anything in response.



"**THE** drama acted out by foolish mortals burns brighter and more beautifully than any other. The greater their desire for peace, the more endearing their lamentations when it just slips through their fingers like water," the schemester soliloquized.

The man who should've died was alive and giving a soliloquy.

"Aaah, what a tragedy. I truly showed that pitiful young lady mercy. Just like how my god gave me the hope to live. Pure, unadulterated happiness should

have awaited her at the end of making the right choice!”

The man threw his arms open wide.

“Alack! Alas! Why do mortals always make the wrong choice?! And why do *I* so revel in their unhappiness?! My greatest lament is that I don’t have a bag of piping hot and buttery POPcorn on hand!”

BAM! He struck a pose and flashed a disingenuous smile. The lights flicked on, illuminating the area, making it clear where he was. Familiar wooden floors and walls boxed him in with various furniture of warped and curious design.

A familiar figure sat upon the throne, another figure standing right beside him.

“The prayers have been fulfilled and the time of celebration has come. I was originally planning to draw out the Mystic Saint, renowned as the strongest Saint of them all, but lo and behold, mon petit Scribe Saint stepped up to bat, saving moi the trouble!” he proclaimed.

“The appearance of a powerful foe that not even mon petit monstres with Hero powers could oppose! To think, o to think, everything played out exactly as moi wanted! With this, all of your plans have been stopped and sealed, my liege!” Vittorio announced, twirling around like a court jester having the time of his life. He sounded so gleeful as he alluded that everything had gone according to his plans. That his master had lost.

“Wouldn’t you agree?” he declared his victory to the man sitting on the throne. “Great God Takuto Ira!”



Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio

Special Unit

Strength: 0 Move: 3

<<Evil>> <<Hero>> <<Fanatic>> <<Instigate>> <<Brainwash>> <<Persuade>> <<Intimidate>>
<<Moralize>> <<Convert>> <<Propaganda>> <<Sabotage>> <<Contaminate Magic>> <<Cultural
Decline>> <<Book Burning>> <<Fraud>> <<Currency Forgery>> <<Spy>> <<Stealth>>
<<Disguise>> <<Hide>> <<Escape>>

※ This Unit can't be controlled.

※ This Unit can't fight.

※ This Unit can use some Commander commands.

※ **This Unit can revive back at base even after it dies.**

<Mynoghra Palace, Throne Room>

VITTORIO, who died while serving as the rearguard for the Cult of Ira, returned to the Accursed Lands earlier than the rest with one of his skills. Now he was declaring his victory over his master in the happiest of moods.

This was why Vittorio was considered one of the most troublesome Hero Units in *Eternal Nations*. Once he was summoned into the world, it was extremely difficult to remove him from the game. Even if he was defeated, he would revive back at base and resume his activities as if nothing had happened. This was the huge bonus he got for not having any combat abilities. It was no wonder many *Eternal Nations*' players were frustrated by the negative impact he had on the game world.

Incidentally, he was the sole Hero who would remain in the game even after Mynoghra—the summoning empire—was defeated. Considering he carried the risk of disrupting the balance of the game from the moment he appeared, it was easy to imagine how much players despised him.

“The Great God Takuto Ira.

It is a calamity that destroys the world. The harbinger of death and terror.

It is a raging inferno. A ruthless blizzard and explosive thunderstorm.

It is blood and blade. Screams and death throes.

It is the sun that illuminates the world and envelops it in darkness.

It has infinite wisdom and infinite authority.

It has eternal life and an eternal body, and it cannot be harmed by metal, hard objects, soft objects, ham, spam, the Six Elements, mistletoe, or anything else conceivable.

It is the beginning and the end. Complete and nothingness.

Praise the Great God.”

Takuto didn't let the Gleeful Spin Doctor's triumphant victory speech throw him off. He had the Cult of Ira's scripture in hand and read out loud the passage on their God—in other words, the part that mentioned Takuto himself.

“I see what you did,” Takuto said thoughtfully. “You added to the ‘Passage on the King of Ruin’ recorded in *The Ancient Saints’ Book of Oracles* to make me a more complete existence.”

“Mwahahaha,” Vittorio cackled proudly in return.

The content change was arrogant to say the least. There was nothing particularly strange about the parts detailing the kind of person Takuto Ira was. But there were large discrepancies in the details about his powers. Powers and abilities the real Takuto didn't possess lined the page one after the other, sprinkling elements throughout to further deify the being known as Takuto.

It's common for there to be a discrepancy between reality and what's written in a book. Exaggerations are more or less expected when it comes to things meant to amplify religious beliefs or promote the status of a specific person. However, anyone who knew Takuto personally understood how strange this passage about him was. And making up this content was exactly what Vittorio had set out to do.

"Redefining Takuto Ira, taking advantage of the fact that I am the Nameless Evil God. You went all in, didn't you?"

Vittorio swept into a deep bow, his eyes gleaming and lips curled into a wicked grin. Vittorio's ideal image of *Takuto Ira* was recorded in the Cult's scripture.

"Is this why idolatry was prohibited, so they wouldn't mistake the object of worship?" Takuto mused. "In order to ensure the new definition of godhood was correctly applied to me, you had to make sure the god worshipped by the Cult of Ira and I were one and the same. No wonder you were against the introduction of unnecessary concepts and interpretations. I can understand why you didn't suggest the Dark Elves, the people living in the Accursed Lands, and Mayor Antelise to join the Cult of Ira. Mad props to you for earning their contempt with your antics and annoying behavior to get them to decide anything you come up with isn't worth considering."

Vittorio's eyes widened ever so slightly at Takuto's expert breakdown of his schemes. He was a tad surprised Takuto had seen through that much. But there was no undoing what had been done after reaching this point. The victor's confidence made the jester extra talkative.

"The Nameless Evil God's powers are extremely dangerous," Vittorio said. "They are the very reason why you lost consciousness, my god. Simply put, the act of imitating all beings means altering oneself. It's nothing more than a foolish strategy that dilutes the very essence of you as *Takuto Ira*."

"The ability to be everyone and no one. You mean to imply it's a contradiction for such an ambiguous being to call itself the individual *Takuto Ira*, yes?" Takuto concluded.

"Precisely! But, be that as it maaaay, you can win big if you handle it with care! If you're an ambiguous being, then just take the ambiguity out of it! The lack of any kind of setting or backstory for the Nameless Evil God makes that possible!"

Namelessness means something is indefinable. Something indefinable can be named whatever someone wants. It can be defined how they want. And so, Vittorio came up with the irreverent plan to redefine Takuto while reviving him. Of course, the question remained if redefining the Nameless Evil God would

bring about the birth of a new god. But that question had already been addressed. Vittorio's theory was proven correct when Takuto regained consciousness not long after establishing the Cult of Ira.

"So, going by what this trickster says, King Takuto's memory loss wasn't due to losing his power? But because his existence became too vague... Am I following this right?" Atou asked, breaking her silent observation.

"That's one way to think of it," Takuto said, vaguely answering Atou's question.

Atou couldn't keep up with their highbrow psychological warfare anymore. She helplessly watched things unfold. While she trusted her master's genius, a piece of her still fretted over what she should do if things took a turn for the worse.

"That's why Vittorio created the Cult of Ira and emblazoned my existence into its scripture," Takuto continued. "All in order to give a fixed definition to the being known as *Takuto Ira*, the king of Mynoghra and the god of the Cult of Ira, through the power of recognition by its many believers. Essentially, he was giving a name to the nameless god. The redefining of a god."

It was the redefinition of *Takuto Ira* using the abilities of the Nameless Evil God. Vittorio's plan had undeniably paid off in spades.

"And..." Takuto paused dramatically, "that god is the real *Takuto Ira*. Not me."

Takuto glanced at the passage deifying him. There was one fatally glaring sentence contained within it.

"The Great God Takuto Ira counts Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio as his number one subordinate," Takuto read off. "...I can't believe you were serious about the whole adorably cute and clumsy bunny girl thing..."

"A Great God needs an equally great companion, obviously. Perfect in every way, adorable from head to toe, obedient and submissive, and with the biggest bazongas in the world! Why, with my skills, it would be a piece of cake for me to change my sex! Let me become your ideal bride right here and now, my god!"

"Please don't decide my preferences without my input and declare yourself my bride..." Takuto's face crinkled up in exasperation.

But he understood just how serious Vittorio was. His dark eyes blazed with the fanaticism to do it. The people of Mynoghra possessed the Fanatic trait, and they tended to turn their fanatical beliefs toward Takuto. But Vittorio's fanaticism for Takuto was on an entirely different level that blew everyone else away.

"That said, I can understand you trying to boost your own standing, but I

find it unfathomable for you to try and change me to fit your ideals,” Takuto said. “Your trust in me should make you reluctant to even consider it...”

Takuto understood Vittorio’s fanaticism, and it’s because he understood him that this particular action didn’t make sense. If Vittorio had acknowledged Takuto as his true master, he’d never have done anything as arrogant as to try to alter or redefine him.

What made him act out of character? Takuto wanted to know the answer to that question.

The answer was something Takuto never expected.

“It’s your fault,” Vittorio accused.

“Mine?” Takuto asked.

“It’s impossible for the Takuto Ira I adore to be like this,” Vittorio gestured to Takuto. “The Takuto Ira I love and adore is even greater, more amazing, overflowing with intelligence, and filled to the brim with malice galore!”

Takuto furrowed his brow. He finally understood the root of his problem.

“*Takuto Ira* isn’t an unenterprising weakling who’d be flirting away the days with this sludge for tits girlie! He’s no namby-pamby who’d care about the feeble Dark Fae! He’s not an indecisive thinker who’d fall a step behind his enemies and lose one of his Heroes!”

Atou bristled with anger at Vittorio’s assertions and was about to lash out at him when Takuto lifted his hand to still her. He wanted to hear Vittorio’s infuriated soliloquy out to the very end.

“Your Vittorio understands better than anyone else how wonderful you are! The infinite wisdom and power you possess! You’re an even more amazing person than this! You’re not someone who should be shooting the breeze here!”

Vittorio was dissatisfied. Dissatisfied his master lost to an enemy. Dissatisfied the master he chose had made a disappointment of himself. He’d never abandon his master. He didn’t possess such debased thoughts. And that was exactly why he elevated his master as high as he wanted him to be.

“Therefore! I shall manifest the true *Takuto Ira*! I am the one who knows Takuto Ira the best! The one who loves Takuto Ira more than anyone in this world! And that’s why...”

Vittorio was unquestionably Takuto Ira’s subordinate. His loyalty and devotion would never waver.

“I shall arrange everything for you, my master! Status, power, subordinates, enemies, everything, all of it—I, your Vittorio, shall prepare for you!”

This was the celebration Vittorio had been alluding to all along. A pious ritual to make all the mistakes and disgraces a thing of the past and allow the

true Takuto Ira to descend upon this world. A blessed first step to spread Mynoghra in its truest state across the land.

“Heed me, Great Player, Takuto Ira! Let us go back to those good old days and set out to conquer the world together! Please hear my plea! That is all your Vittorio could ever waaaaaant!” Vittorio declared loudly. He envisioned the glorious prosperity of Mynoghra and the glorious future with his master as if it were about to be made true.

“Yeah, I like that. Sounds real good. But I reject your proposal.”

“...Wha?” Vittorio squawked in response to Takuto’s refusal. He didn’t understand what his master was saying. Well, he understood the words, but couldn’t comprehend why in the worlds he’d say such a thing.

“But wow. Now that’s the Vittorio I know and love. I’m really happy you told me how you feel,” Takuto said.

“Why...?”

The most foolish thing a schemer can do is ask “Why.” The act of seeking an answer to a situation that one cannot understand, rather than trying to deceive the other person, is the same as admitting one’s defeat. Vittorio, of course, understood this. He understood and asked why anyways.

“Oh? Did you think I’d say yes? Well, I suppose it’s true this scripture defines Vittorio as my most trusted subordinate. It says his advice is all I listen to. Greedy, aren’t’cha?” Takuto added, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

Takuto was right. This was also why Vittorio was filled with such confidence he spouted his whole evil scheme right in front of him like a two-bit villain.

As far as he understood it, Takuto had regained consciousness through the power of recognition brought into existence by the followers of the Cult of Ira that Vittorio had founded. That could only mean that the cult’s scripture had the intended effect on the Nameless Evil God, which should also lead to Takuto accepting anything Vittorio said as his number one subordinate.

And that wasn’t all. Vittorio had laid the groundwork for several other strategies. He greatly increased the national power of Mynoghra by preparing a huge second domestic force under the banner of the Cult of Ira, and he also provided a means of control that was not bound by the state, called religion. And in hindsight, he’d prepared a powerful foe in the form of the Scribe Saint, crafting a scenario the current Takuto couldn’t deal with in terms of military strength.

Rejecting the existence of the strongest and invincible *Takuto Ira* depicted in the cult’s scripture didn’t make sense from a logical standpoint either. It shouldn’t have even been possible for *Takuto Ira* to refuse his most dependable

and number one subordinate's plan. The scripture removed his ability to do so.

Something...is terribly wrong. Vittorio's eyes swam. An impossible notion plagued him—the notion his own ingenious schemes were crumbling from their very foundation.

"I had a feeling something was off from the start. I've always loved how you conduct yourself, but I sensed you were holding back. Just as you had misgivings about my abilities, I harbored the same misgivings about your actions," Takuto said, sounding like he saw right through Vittorio's schemes.

But how could he? From the moment he awoke, he was continually transforming into Vittorio's ideal *Takuto Ira*. How could a Takuto Ira, who counted the Gleeful Spin Doctor as his closest confidant, think like this? Wasn't Sludge Atou absent from their last audience because he'd usurped her position? Hadn't Takuto sent her away to make it known to all within and without these walls that Vittorio was his new confidant?

"Well, I won't deny I had a lot of bum strategies and failed a few times because I underestimated the situation," Takuto continued. He spoke with such casual ease that it seemed as though he were making light of Vittorio's confusion. He spoke with the lightheartedness of someone catching up with an old friend on life. "I knew I disappointed you with that. So, I worked in my own countermeasures."

This doesn't make sense. It's not right. Something's going horribly wrong. Vittorio wracked his brain as he reflected on his actions until this point. But he couldn't find any mistakes or failures within. At what point did Takuto find out about his plans and employ countermeasures? Awash in feelings of amazement, shock, and a strange sense of elation, Vittorio awaited his master's next words.

"Last we met, you said everything needs a second plan. Remember?" Takuto asked.

"Y-Yes, of course. I'd never forget," Vittorio replied.

A second plan—an alternative method or backup option. Unexpected factors can occur in every operation. It's a habit of tacticians to devise various countermeasures for when this happens.

Vittorio had prepared Lector Yona'Yona for this purpose. From the start, Yona'Yona's purpose was to control the Cult of Ira if Vittorio was immobilized by one problem or another. In that sense, she was a Lector in the truest sense. But Takuto wasn't referring to Yona'Yona. He was talking about the need to prepare for the unexpected in advance.

"I see. Glad to hear it," he said. "Then this should be enough for you to figure it out."

Takuto's form blurred before his eyes. In his place appeared a deformed

baby—Takuto’s powerful subordinate with the Mimic skill.

“It’s true that this problem occurred from me using too much of the Nameless Evil God’s power as *Takuto Ira*. I must applaud you for your magnificent plan. But it’s not like I didn’t think about how to deal with this problem. I did take precautions,” Takuto’s words spilled from the baby’s mouth.

A specific skill was needed to see through Mimic. Vittorio had a similar skill, but perception was outside of his realm of expertise. It’d be a lie to say it was an entirely unexpected move, but...Vittorio couldn’t see the point of it.

“B-Botchling!!” Vittorio cried. “Were you acting with Imitation and Telepathy? But why?! It can’t be...!”

Vittorio thought back to his last audience with Takuto. What did he say to him then? Was he speaking to the real Takuto Ira that time? What if he had sworn allegiance to the deformed baby monster mimicking Takuto and curried favor with it instead? But if he had...the rest of his schemes would fall apart.

All his strict teachings forbidding idolatry. It was absolute doctrine that one should not worship anyone other than *Takuto Ira*. If they did, then their recognition of him as god would disperse and give way to interpretation.

And I made that mistake! I worshipped the wrong being! Me, none other than the Archlector and founder of the Cult of Ira!

“Y-You deceived me?” Vittorio cried.

Takuto chuckled in response.

Vittorio didn’t know where the real Takuto was, but he was undoubtedly observing the whole situation from somewhere. He’d heard Takuto hadn’t taken back his Commander authority, but that was a bald-faced lie.

He played me. I fell for it, hook, line, and sinker!

“A battle of wits with you is always so exhilarating. How nostalgic. I remember how every time I guessed your schemes, I’d clap and cheer,” Takuto said, sounding truly nostalgic.

Their positions had flipped. Now Vittorio’s plans had been sealed and Takuto’s victory was assured. There was almost no way for the Gleeful Spin Doctor to spin his way out of this one. He had no idea what his opponent’s hand was. Vittorio wasn’t so naïve as to think he could recover at this stage.

“But!” he shouted. “I still can’t accept it! You should have been affected by my redefinition! If not, you’d still be unconscious! You couldn’t have plotted against me! I! AM! YOUR ONE AND ONLY TRUSTED CONFIDANT!”

“You were right in guessing that my loss of consciousness stemmed from my abilities as the Nameless Evil God,” Takuto replied. “You’re not wrong to think that is as much a part of me as being the King of Ruin and Mynoghra’s Commander is. Your one mistake was not realizing that applies only to *Takuto*

Ira, not **Takuto Ira**.”

Vittorio gasped. He likely just figured out what was going on. But it was a humiliating blow. If Takuto was telling the truth, then Vittorio had been dancing all by his lonesome from the beginning when he thought he was tangoing...

“I assume you’ve already started to grasp the bigger picture by now. Grasped that this world has a multilayered structure,” Takuto said.

Vittorio slowly nodded.

Vittorio roughly understood there was a certain kind of wall those who existed in this world could never overcome. For example, beings that originally existed in the world, such as the Dark Elves, could generally be defined as being on a par with, or inferior to, beings like NPCs in games. On the contrary, reincarnated people such as Players were higher-ranking beings, and the Gods who summoned them to this world were even higher-ranking. Although there was no definitive division or difference in appearance between them, it was possible to distinguish them by their overwhelming difference in power.

“*Takuto Ira* is nothing more than a character in *Eternal Nations*. And is a part of **Takuto Ira**, a higher being,” Takuto explained.

The Nameless Evil God was just one facet of *Takuto Ira*, the world’s best *Eternal Nations*’ player. Just as a chess piece can’t attack the hand that moves it, it is extremely difficult for lower-level entities to directly influence higher-level entities. Even if the entity known as *Takuto Ira* disappears, the person known as **Takuto Ira** won’t. Especially when it comes to matters of existence and spirituality...

Such is the law of this world.

“Ultimately, even if *Takuto Ira* lost his personality to the power of the Nameless Evil God from the start, it didn’t affect **me**.”

Since the day **Takuto Ira** reincarnated into this world, he had always acted as an *Eternal Nations*’ Player, making him Mynoghra’s Commander, the King of Ruin, and the Nameless Evil God. But his true nature was always that of **Takuto Ira**—the gamer boy who conquered many campaigns with his absolute favorite characters and died well before his time. That was who Takuto was as a person—his unwavering true nature.

“But you see...I think I might’ve been playing the Commander a little too long,” Takuto said. “I should’ve been more self-aware.”

Takuto’s loss of self actually had to do with getting too into his roleplaying. He self-inserted so much into the game, he ended up confusing himself with the game character. Just as some people can have seizures when watching certain movies, Player **Takuto** was influenced by the concept of the character *Takuto Ira* and temporarily got pulled into the nature of the Nameless

Evil God.

Fortunately, Takuto had anticipated something like that might happen and had a solution.

“The solution was having the girl I trust the most in the world, who came to learn all about me through thousands of campaigns, keep telling me about her memories with **Takuto Ira**, reminding me of who I am. Simple, right?”

He had Atou with him. By Atou regaling him with their memories while he was bedridden, he awakened to his true nature and broke free from the spell that was *Takuto Ira*. It was almost like he was the princess and she was the prince coming to awaken him from his fairy-tale slumber. This made it possible for him to recover as fast as he’d predicted.

He knew that Atou would act according to his predictions, because he would have done the same for her. Takuto’s revival had nothing to do with Vittorio’s schemes. It was just that the timing had perfectly coincided with what was actually due to Atou’s devotion.

Takuto would save Atou from any predicament, just as she would save him from any predicament. It was far too embarrassing to say aloud, but immeasurable trust existed between them.

“Those who have intelligence that surpasses all others, manipulate and ridicule everything in their wake. But that also just goes to show they have never been deceived before.”

The sound of light footsteps scuffing the wood floor filled the room. The door creaked open, and someone entered, but Vittorio was in such shock that he didn’t have the energy to turn around.

“Those are the type who tend to get tripped up in the most unlikely of places. Their self-confidence that they’ll never be the one fooled turns into the very arrogance that sees them killed.”

Could this situation even be defined with arrogance? Vittorio’s defeat was decided from the beginning. The groundwork was already laid before Vittorio was even summoned, and it was completed to perfection. It would be impossible for Vittorio to turn things around. Just as the past can’t be changed, there was no room for him to interfere with an already completed revival.

“Why don’t I just put it in terms you can understand?”

A voice came from directly behind Vittorio.

Aaah, this is it. This is the voice. His voice.

It was the voice of the only person who could control Vittorio and make him dance in the palm of his hand. The voice of the person who had amassed all sorts of knowledge and used his ingenuity to control the Gleeful Spin Doctor who made a mockery of the world.

“From the very beginning, everything was set to be resolved as long as I had Atou.”

A hand rested on Vittorio’s shoulder. Tears poured down the jester’s face.



He was happier than could be to see the master he'd been waiting for, to know the master he believed in was as great of an entity as he'd always imagined.

Aaah, hurry up. Hurry up and say it!

Let me taste the sweet humiliation of defeat!

“You were always my second plan, Vittorio. Looks like you never got your shot.”

Takuto moved around in front of Vittorio and looked him in the eyes. His gentle words were more precious than gold. They were the first words Vittorio had heard face-to-face with his true master.

The taste of defeat drove Vittorio into greater madness, greater fanaticism.

Chapter 17: Flux

THE King of Ruin defeated the Gleeeful Spin Doctor. There wasn't even a contest between them from the start. Takuto had predicted what would happen and had taken the appropriate countermeasures long before Atou summoned Vittorio. It didn't matter whether Atou reminded Takuto of who he was or if she'd panicked and gone straight to Vittorio for help—however the dice fell, Takuto's victory was assured.

It was a plain and simple fact that Takuto Ira utilized Vittorio the best in *Eternal Nations*.

“K-King Takutooooooooo!!”

Atou broke out of statue mode, dashed over to Takuto, and threw herself on him. Takuto was taken by surprise, but remained calm—a sign of his growth, perhaps?

“I-I'm impressed beyond impressed!”

Contrary to Takuto's inner turmoil, Atou was a ball of excitement. Takuto had brilliantly trounced Vittorio. In addition to the sweet exhilaration of seeing her spiteful rival get served, learning that Takuto always chose her first brought her to peak bliss.

“Goshwowboyoboy! You're the best, King Takuto! To think you would so spectacularly see through Vittorio's schemes like this! I'm moved!”

Meanwhile, Takuto was as stiff as a board as Atou wrapped her arms around him. He'd successfully put on a calm front, but that was the extent of what Takuto could handle. He had no insightful words, he merely let his precious, overly excited confidant have her way with him.

“But why didn't you tell me anything?” she asked. “I... I was seriously concerned I might lose you for good, King Takuto!”

“Uh, I actually did tell you. You just didn't catch on, Atou,” Takuto replied.

“...KING TAKUTOOOOOOO!!”

Did that do the trick...? Takuto sweated nervously as she tightened her arms around him. Takuto had indeed informed Atou about his plan in its early stages. He didn't want her to worry too much and thought her knowing would earn her cooperation without her going berserk over a dumb misunderstanding. But judging by her reaction, she didn't understand his explanation.

Atou was never designed to be a scheming Hero, nor did she have a reason to deal with background machinations, so he couldn't fault her there. But Takuto was a little bothered she didn't try harder to understand what he told her. The sentiment was lost on the person in question, however. Not only did her beloved master take her back from their enemies, but he'd also resolved all the trouble that followed like it was a cinch. She couldn't help but be on cloud nine. Although he could do with a little less over-excited squeezing...

"Mwa! HA! HA! Now it's been made clear. King Takuto's confidant is me, as it should be! A small-time prankster like you can't worm his way in between me and King Takuto, Vittorio!" Atou declared her triumph.

It was questionable what she even did, but she seemed to feel the need to boast about her victory over him. Emboldened by the childish desire of not wanting him to steal away the master she adored, Atou confronted Vittorio with the reality that there was no room for him to steal her thunder.

As for the Spinful Glee Doctor who'd suffered an overwhelming defeat...

"Eargghh!"

He let out an ear-piercing cry and started rolling around on the ground.

"Uhh..."

Takuto and Atou were both surprised by his sudden, strange behavior. Vittorio screamed even louder when he saw how they reacted to him, hugging each other and looking dumbfounded like an adorable married couple.

"What is this sudden bout of two-timing I'm being made to witness before my very eyes! My brain is gonna rupturrrre!"

"It's not two-timing when we were never in a relationship to start with..." Takuto said dryly.

"Know your place! Know it!"

In Vittorio's mind, his beloved master had just been whisked away by some bratty girl who came out of nowhere to seduce him! Takuto and Atou refuted him with all their might, but he wouldn't be known as the Gleeful Spin Doctor if he just rolled over and accepted their words. Vittorio continued shouting in resentment at them, trying to drive home just how much two-timing can break a person's heart. Obviously, they let it go in one ear and out the other.

"U-Um, Atou," Takuto said bashfully. "Er...you're kinda close."

"Oh! I-I'm sorry! I couldn't help myself when I learned how much you think of me, King Takuto..." she responded shyly.

"Y-Yeah. Thanks again. Um...I made a quick comeback because you cared for me the whole time."

"O-Of course, I care for you deeply..."

"U-Um..." Takuto fidgeted.

“Wah! No! Forget I said that! That didn’t just happen, King Takuto!”

They seemed to finally realize they were hugging each other close because they had pulled apart, their faces cherry red. Vittorio had already been ousted from their little world.

Let’s just ignore Vittorio, because he never stops talking, both Takuto and Atou had come to the same conclusion, and it was the right decision. Naturally the pathetic Hero who’d come in second best was fuming mad.

“Damn you! Stop acting out a bittersweet romantic comedy about two middle schoolers who just started dating!” Vittorio raved. “Is this how you repay me for all the blood, sweat, and tears I poured into this operation?!”

“W-We look like we’re d-dating?! Oh my dark heavens! King Takuto and I do get along *exceptionally* well! Our happy ending was decided from the beginning! You should know your place as the Second Plan and devote yourself to Mynoghra somewhere I can’t see you! Am I right, King Takuto?!”

“Y-Yeah, Atou.”

“Ehehe!”

Atou was a natural airhead. She overflowed with feelings for Takuto, and although she was just expressing her sincere affection for him, it really grated on Vittorio’s nerves. Vittorio rarely showed his true anger, but something about this really pissed him off. In that sense, Atou and Vittorio were doomed to be eternal rivals who got along like cats and dogs. The saying they go together like water and oil fit them perfectly.

“Are you pretending to be the canon heroine?!” Vittorio thundered. “Our race to be picked as the best waifu isn’t over yet!”

“Heck no. Why do you even think you can compete in the heroine race in the first place?” Atou challenged. “Not happening!”

“Shuuuuuuuuuuuuut up!! I’m never giving up, Great God Takuto Ira! Someday I’ll kick that flowers-for-brains, lovesick girl from her high horse and secure my position as God’s cute and clumsy bunny girl spouse!”

“Oh god...you haven’t given that up yet?” Takuto groaned.

If Vittorio had pulled off his plans, the most invincible Takuto Ira would have burst onto the scene to conquer the world with Vittorio, a cute and clumsy bunny girl, as his beloved subordinate and spouse about now. Takuto had no doubt Vittorio would use every means at his disposal to transform into the ultimate spouse, but with the core person being Vittorio, he felt nothing but guttural repulsion at the idea. He was positive that Atou would’ve been expelled from the Palace in that alternate world and doomed to beg on the streets. Takuto couldn’t imagine a worse reality.

I am so glad I crushed his plans. Takuto shuddered.

“Moi won’t give up! As long as you don’t give up, your dreams will come true! Never give up! *Ne jamais baisser les bras!*” Vittorio shouted.

“GIVE UP!” Atou shouted back at him. “You have no chance! King Takuto and I won the day! The race is up! Game, set, match!”

The two Heroes noisily bickered about the most ridiculous thing.

In any case, the current set of problems was finally settled. Takuto had shown Vittorio his true status as ruler and had regained his powers. He had Atou at his side, and Mynoghra’s empire management was getting back on track, although there were a lot of things that needed to be tweaked. Vittorio’s antics resulted in the forces of good becoming even more powerful, but that was an inevitable accident. To Takuto, the higher the difficulty level, the more rewarding the win. He’d obtained an amusing religious body in the Cult of Ira as a result, and that would likely increase the things he had to do.

Takuto hadn’t forgotten his objective. His goal of obtaining an Ascension Victory and regaining everything he had lost forced him to move forward without growing arrogant or complacent.

“Well...I’m glad Vittorio is here,” Takuto said. “Continue to lend me that wicked wisdom of yours. And have fun...in moderation.”

“Mmmm-hmmm! Of course! Naturally! Aye, aye, sir! Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio will devote everything moi has to you and only you! As I always have and alwaaaaays will!”

With that, the curtain safely closed on this particular problem.

Through his returned Commander authority, Takuto was aware of the battle that took place in Amrita and the status of the Cult of Ira followers who’d retreated to Seldoch. He needed to reorganize the troops, call back the Elfuur Sisters, and give Yona’Yona new orders, but they had expanded Mynoghra’s territory, getting excellent results all things considered. Granted, the sudden increase in territories under Mynoghra’s control would bury everyone under mountains of paperwork, but that was a fate they couldn’t escape.

Now that I think about it, it’s been a long time since I last had the chance to sit down and calmly plot out my next strategy. Takuto couldn’t wait to think about the next strategy including Vittorio.

“Without further ado, I’ll get started right away on the next stra—”

Vittorio wasn’t the type to listen, so he needed to be put in his place when push came to shove.

“Before you do that, explain yourself to the others,” Takuto warned the Gleeful Spin Doctor, who was right back to his nefarious scheming a second after announcing his loyalty.

“What others?” Vittorio asked.

“Yona’Yona and the Elfuur Sisters,” Takuto replied.

“...Oh, crap.”

Vittorio had completely forgotten about them. Or maybe he just didn’t care. He had faked his death to escape from the Scribe Saint. To make matters worse, he let everyone think he really died and never informed them about his ability to revive or his safe return. Takuto didn’t know how the girls felt about Vittorio, but judging from how he’d seen them behave, he assumed Vittorio was in for some serious punishment.

“You reap what you sow, Vittorio. Be prepared for a thorough beating. You can’t die, so it doesn’t matter what they do to you,” Takuto flashed a wicked grin, ordering his Hero to accept punishment.

He’s caused those around him so much misery, he should just take his punishment like a man. He deserves it.

Just as this conversation between master and servant was drawing to a close—

“Ah, ah. Hello? Anybody there? Can you hear me?”

The three of them gasped.

A loud voice echoed as if it was reverberating throughout the world. The trio immediately entered battle positions and scanned their surroundings for the source of the voice. Atou detected the presence and source of the sound first.

“King Takuto! Outside!”

They rushed outside. All three of them had severe expressions, but the unexpected was commonplace in this world. Victory was a pipe dream if they let something like this throw them off balance. They were surprised, but not shaken. However...

“Good day to all the lovelies residing in Idoragya. It’s everybody’s favorite naughty jack-off material, Hottie Succubus Vagia ♡!”

Seeing the giant, half-naked nympho projected in the sky toppled that premise.

“What’s the deal with this harlot...?”

Takuto couldn’t help agreeing with Atou’s exasperated question. The woman’s body was so big it seemed like she would pierce the heavens. Seeing as they could blurrily make out the scenery behind her, she was probably an illusion created by some spell or magitech. It reminded Takuto of a performance you might occasionally see by a villain in manga and games, but even he was thrown for a loop when the projection was of a hot, voluptuous woman who was bad for the heart.



“El-Nah’s Witch?” he guessed. “She’s gone from doing nothing to pulling a big stunt, huh?”

She wasn’t looking directly at them, meaning this projection wasn’t intended only for Mynoghra. It was likely being projected to everyone on the continent. What she said next practically confirmed it.

“I’m making a proposal to all the Players, organizations, and nations in this world, tehe♡! I’m sure you all have your own thoughts, but fighting without getting to know each other is pure nonsense! Why don’t we call a truce and talk it out all friendly like? Witch Vagia here has prepared the stage for just that, ehe♡!”

Takuto had already defeated the Player behind the tabletop RPG forces. The conflict between them had been abrupt and the results were mediocre at best. Although Mynoghra was after world conquest, the goals of the TRPG forces had been a mystery, and the same could be said for El-Nah and the Witch who dominated them. Just because Mynoghra wasn’t going to change its goals didn’t mean it was a bad idea to learn what their opponents wanted.

Especially since this world had gods summoning them there. It was an intriguing proposal from the perspective of trying to understand their intentions, too.

“I’ll be sending a messenger to each group later! Now then, in the name of the God of Excess’s apostle, Witch Vagia, I look forward to seeing each of you in attendance, darlings~♡!”

She said everything she had to say and vanished. Sending messengers meant she had information on everyone.

El-Nah’s Witch. Mynoghra had barely any information on the Succubi army and Witch Vagia. While they had their hands full with Qualia and Lenea, they had fallen a step behind on the information-gathering front.

“King Takuto, what’s the meaning of this...?” Atou asked, confused. She was awash with the unspoken displeasure of having to deal with more trouble just when they thought things had finally calmed down.

Takuto wholeheartedly agreed with her feelings there. He felt like his plans to strengthen the border with Qualia and turtle up to increase national power had been dashed. But the world wouldn’t wait once it took its turn.

“Hmm...” he hummed in response.

“Looks like things are finally moving,” Vittorio said, equally exasperated. He loved everything flashy, but he must’ve had his qualms with Witch Vagia’s over the top performance.

Takuto hoped he wouldn’t develop a strange sense of rivalry with the Witch, but he was painfully aware nothing went as he hoped with Vittorio—and

that the flux of fate wouldn't wait for them.

“Oh?”

A warning flashed through Takuto's mind, followed by an announcement.

WORLD MESSAGE

The termination of Player **Masato Kigou** and **Worthless Witch Munin** has been confirmed.

The God of Clarity has lost and will be expelled from the Game.

The Game Administrator—The Board God—is rooting for a good fight from the rest of the Players.

OK

A System Message came in now of all times, and one that alluded to the very conflict embroiling this world. It even referenced the gods...

“Sounds like things are going to get even busier from here...”

Nearly drowning in the torrent of new information, Takuto smiled at the World’s challenge to his reign.

Afterword

FEHU Kazuno here. Thank you for picking up a copy of *Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra Volume 6*. There's something especially moving about this being the sixth time I've greeted you this way. I'm sure you are all tired of having to read my greetings six times, but please bear with me again. Personally, I hope to write an Afterword like this another ninety-six times.

Now, to the point, *Volume 6* is packed full of new characters. I put a lot of effort into crafting the backstories and personalities for each and every character, but if I had to pick a favorite, it's got to be none other than Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio. He's the newest Hero unit to be summoned by Mynoghra. He's notorious in *Eternal Nations* for having a godawful personality and for being even trickier to use. I believe I did a pretty good job of portraying him in all his awful glory. What did you think?

In other news, this volume was drastically streamlined and polished up from the web novel version I posted on various reading sites. A lot of the fat was cut out, but I'm confident that made the main story beats and worldbuilding much easier to enjoy. I hope you enjoyed it.

I also want to draw attention to the fact that Yasaiko Midorihana-sensei's *Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra* manga has released its fourth volume in Japan in 2023. If you haven't had the chance to check it out yet, I highly recommend reading it alongside the novel version. The manga version has just about reached the end of the novel's third volume. Simply put, you can now enjoy the key scene surrounding Isla in manga format. I was moved beyond words by Midorihana-sensei's depiction of that tragic event. I'm still affected by it to this day. I hope you can share in the emotion and excitement with me!

Since I've just about reached my allotted page limit, it's time for the customary Acknowledgment Corner (like an established newspaper column)! To Illustrator Jun, the editing department at GC Novels, my editor, the proofreaders, the design company, and everyone else, thank you for everything you do. To my wonderful readers, thank you for supporting me. I hope to see you here again next time, the time after that, and the ninety-four times after that.



CONGRATULATIONS
ON MYNOGHRA
VOLUME 6!

Jun

With the issues with Vittorio resolved, Takuto thought he could finally focus on Domestic Affairs, until Witch Vagia shows up offering a truce. What direction will this international conference lead Mynoghra and the chaos-embroided Idoragya as a whole?

07

COMING
SOON!!!

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

07





The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

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